Sports Illustrated

AUGUST 2023
VOLUME 134 | NO. 7
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Photograph by
CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

The POWER LIST

THE 50 **MOST INFLUENTIAL** FIGURES IN SPORTS

- Athletes
- Dealmakers
- Executives
- Icons & Leaders
- **INFLUENCERS**

Jake Paul

EST 1934
HILLSHIRE FARM
ULTRA THIN
OVEN ROASTED
TURKEY BREAST

CAN A SANDWICH CRAFTED WITH DELECTABLY ROASTED CUTS MAKE YOUR TASTE BUDS QUAKE WITH YEARNING?

OH, HILL YEAH.™

EST 1934
HILLSHIRE FARM

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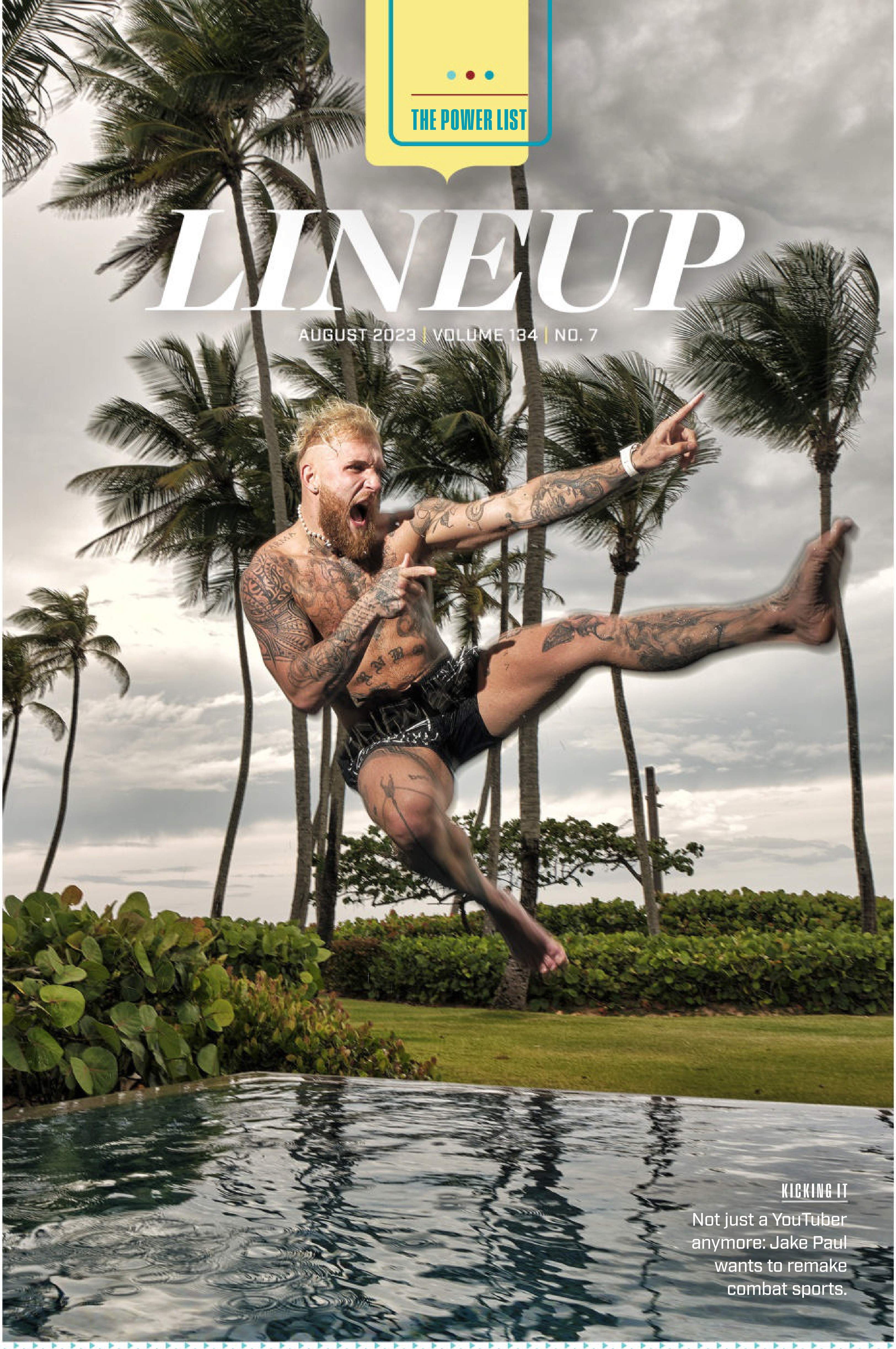
THE POWER LIST

LINEUP

AUGUST 2023 | VOLUME 134 | NO. 7



KICKING IT

Not just a YouTuber anymore: Jake Paul wants to remake combat sports.

CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE; STYLING BY LAUREN STEELE. CLOTHING BY LUMIERES BY KAI
PHOTOGRAPHED AT DORADO BEACH, A RITZ-CARLTON RESERVE

DEPARTMENTS ▸

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SCORECARD P. 12
FACES IN THE CROWD P. 24
POINT AFTER P. 80

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These Bills buddies have Buffalo dreaming big p.34
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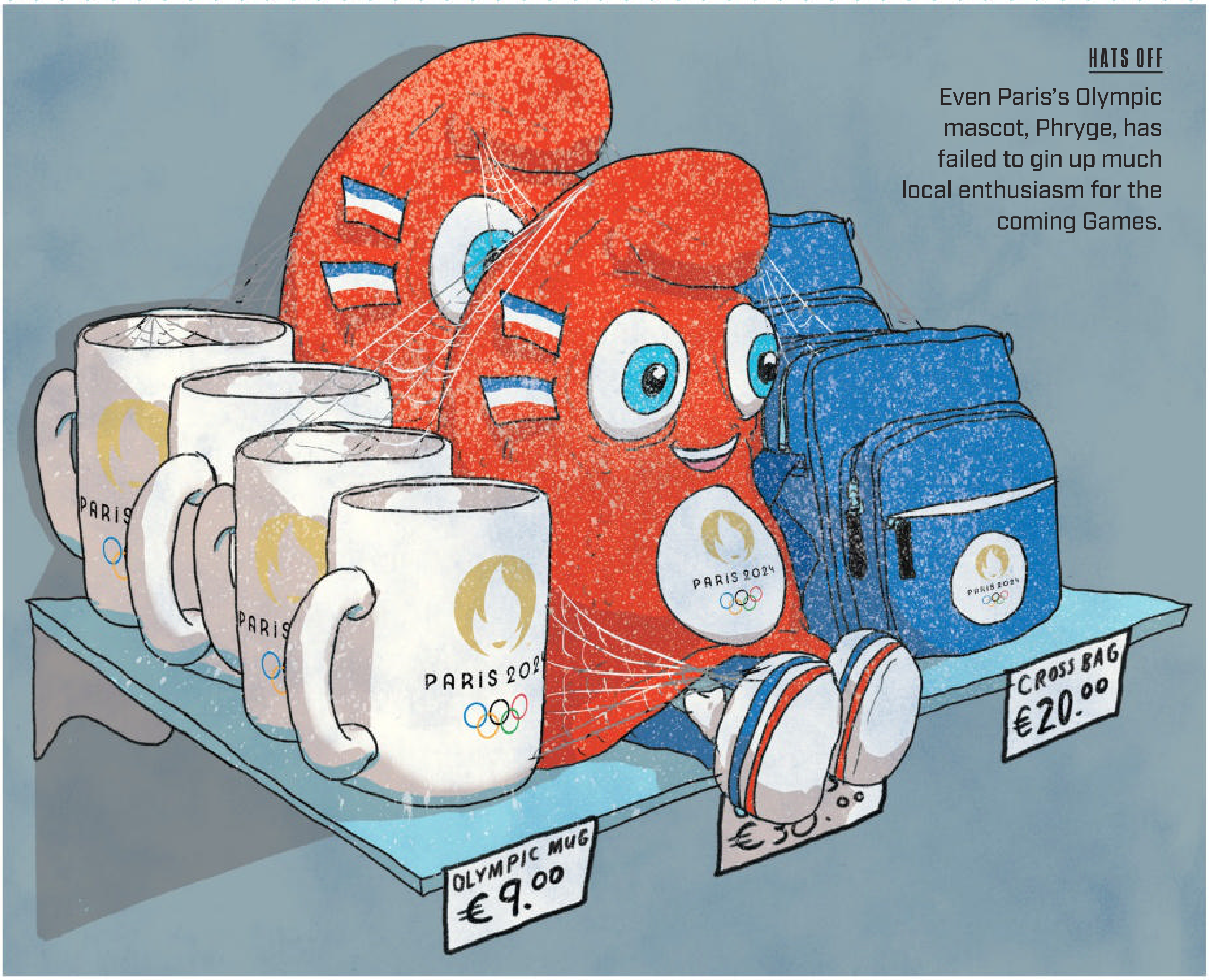
LINEUP



HATS OFF

Even Paris's Olympic mascot, Phryge, has failed to gin up much local enthusiasm for the coming Games.

THE POWER LIST

The definitive index of the figures who drive the sports world—on and off the field and court

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JACOB deGROM

The righthander once seemed destined for Cooperstown. Now, after another arm injury (and surgery), he's joined a more painful club

BY TOM VERDUCCI

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PARIS 2024

Preening despots? Massive debts? Non, merci. One year out, Paris is shaping up as a very boring Olympics—exactly what the IOC needs

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL BYERS

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LEADING OFF

Spe

PER

THIS SUMMER IN BERLIN, SOME 7,000 ATHLETES FROM 190 COUNTRIES GATHERED FOR
EUNICE KENNEDY SHRIVER FOUNDED THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS TO ALLOW THOSE WITH
IN 1968, BY LEADING THE COMPETITORS IN THE SAME PLEDGE THE ATHLETES RECITED

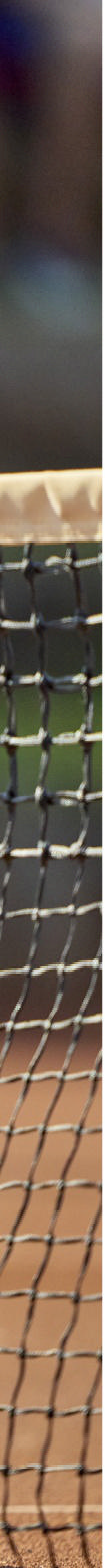
cial
FORMANCES

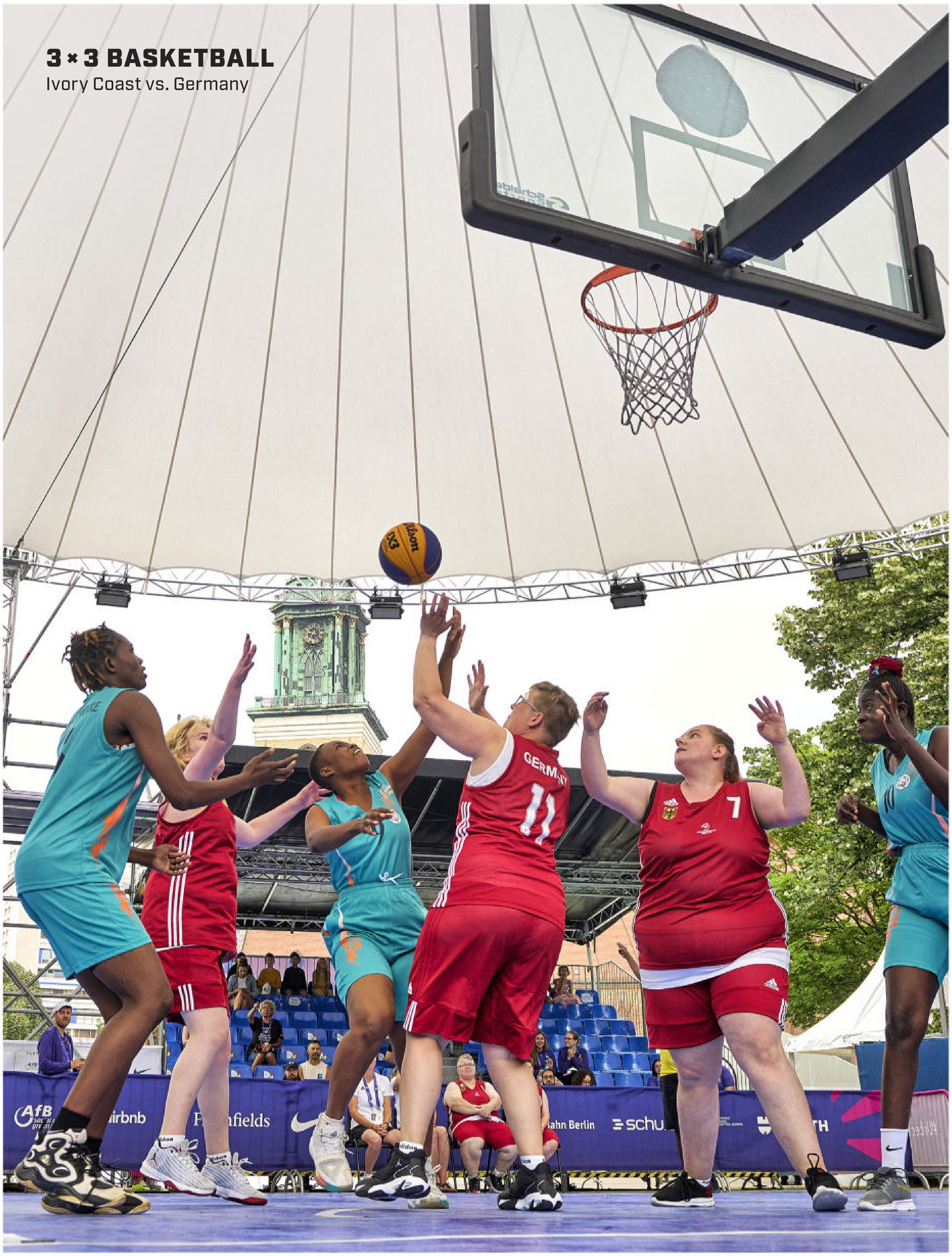
LONG JUMP
KEVIN PENTE
Hungary

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO

THE XVI SPECIAL OLYMPICS WORLD GAMES. INSPIRED BY HER SISTER ROSEMARY,
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES TO COMPETE. SHE OPENED THE FIRST GAMES IN CHICAGO
IN GERMANY: "LET ME WIN, BUT IF I CANNOT WIN, LET ME BRAVE IN THE ATTEMPT"

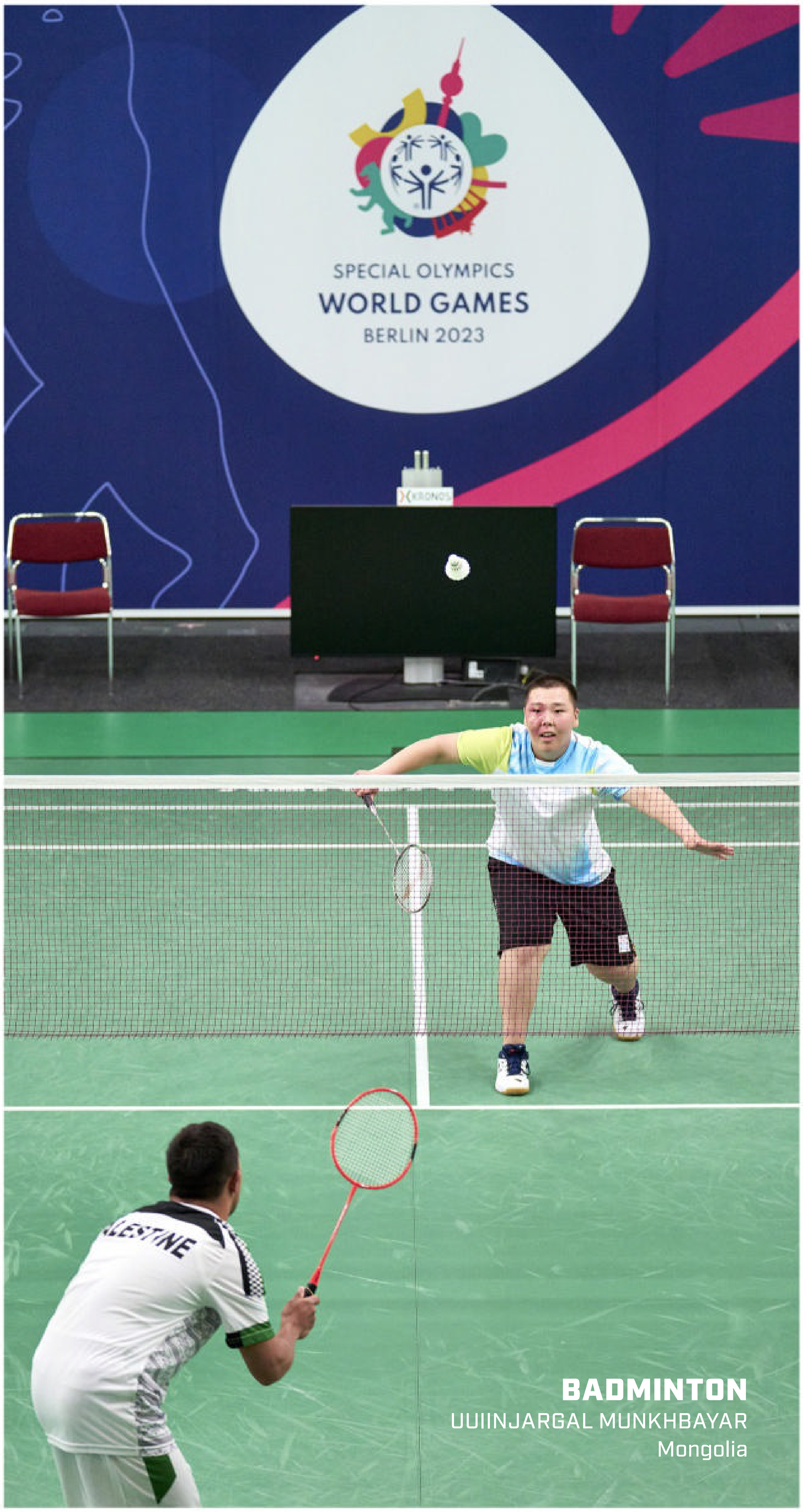
TENNIS
LAMAR JOHNSON
Saint Kitts and Nevis





3 × 3 BASKETBALL

Ivory Coast vs. Germany


SPECIAL OLYMPICS
WORLD GAMES
BERLIN 2023
KRONOS
LESTINE

BADMINTON
UUIINJARGAL MUNKHBAYAR
Mongolia

7 × 7 SOCCER
France vs. Hungary

SCORECARD

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MONEY TO SPEND

7
PROFESSIONAL GOLFERS' ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA
PGA
1916
461 YDS
PAR 4

DARREN CARROLL/PGA OF AMERICA/GETTY IMAGES

NOW THAT IT IS DOING BUSINESS WITH THE SAUDIS, THE PGA TOUR HAS THE MEANS TO ACQUIRE ASSETS THAT WILL PROTECT ITS FUTURE

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

TWO CONTENTIOUS years in men's golf seemingly ended in June with a surprising truce: The PGA Tour and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund would end the lawsuits and bad-mouthing and form a business partnership instead. It turns out that sometimes money trumps principle. Who knew?

Much of the ensuing discussion has been about which side won the fight. It is a good question, but in the wrong tense.

For the Tour, the fight is ongoing, because for the Tour, the fight was not so much against LIV Golf as for the future of the Tour. The past two years showed the Tour was more vulnerable than commissioner Jay Monahan had realized. The next few years will be largely about making sure the Tour is never that at risk again. Saudi money threatened the Tour's position; now Saudi money can shore it up.

The PGA Tour has always been in a strange position: Though it is the primary competitive outlet for most of the best players in the world, it does not own any of the four golf majors. The Tour generally has strong relationships with golf's other governing bodies, but still: Imagine NFL commissioner Roger Goodell being another organization's guest at the Super Bowl. Then imagine somebody forming a rival football league and suing for a chance to qualify for the Super Bowl. That is what just happened in golf.

If the deal goes through, and survives antitrust scrutiny, Monahan can do something about this. PIF will not directly fund the Tour. It will, instead, have the right of first refusal for any investments the Tour makes. Essentially, if the Tour wants to buy something, PIF can help pay for the purchase, but the Tour will still control it.

PIF has not guaranteed it will spend a single dollar, and, when the deal was struck, the Tour did not announce any planned investments. It is theoretically possible that nothing will come of the partnership—but only theoretically. PIF wants to spend a ton of money on golf. The Tour wants to control the sport. Together, they can meld those desires and dramatically alter the landscape of golf.

If you ran the PGA Tour and you suddenly had an investing partner

BIG PAYDAY
McIlroy (opposite) earned less than $4 million for his two PGA wins, a sum that would be dwarfed if the Tour ran the major.

who was ready to spend billions of dollars, what would you try to buy?

The absolute best thing the Tour could do for itself now is purchase Augusta National. That would give the Tour control of the Masters, the event that means more to most golf fans and golfers than any other—and the one that, because of its iconic course, is the hardest to replicate. But the PGA Tour has a better chance of purchasing the Eiffel Tower. The people who run Augusta National are not selling.

Monahan's first offer should be to the PGA of America: For an enormous sum, the Tour would get to own the PGA Championship and Ryder Cup. The PGA of America can continue to be the organization for teaching pros. The Tour will support it, both with the purchase price and with public gestures, like keeping spots in the PGA Championship field for teaching pros.

PGA of America leaders would surely hate this idea. They would like to believe the privilege of handing out the Wanamaker Trophy is not for sale. But again: billions. In the best interests of the Tour, Monahan should make an offer, so the Tour would control three of the six biggest tournaments in the men's game: In addition to the PGA Championship and the Ryder Cup (which it would control in partnership with the DP World Tour), the PGA Tour already has the Players Championship.

The possibilities from there are tantalizing. The Tour could make the PGA Championship the only major to be held all around the world. It could tie Ryder Cup qualification more directly to what happens on Tour. It could even tinker with the format of either event. Most

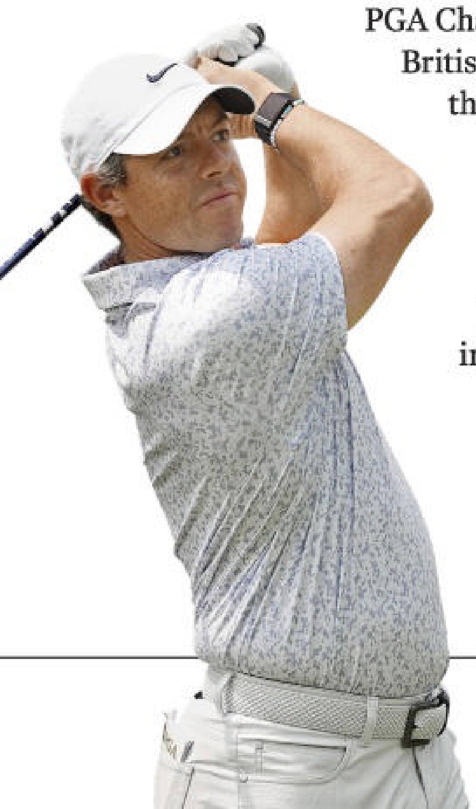
KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (CROWD); SCOTT TAETSCH/
PGA OF AMERICA/GETTY IMAGES (MCILROY)

importantly, the Tour would make it much more difficult for anybody to threaten it.

And if the PGA of America said no? The PGA Tour could make things ugly. After years of selling its flagship event, the Players Championship, as the fifth major, it could get aggressive and market the Players as the fourth major. Hold it in May, on the same weekend as the PGA Championship, but with 20 times the purse and an even larger trophy. Then let the players decide which event is more important.

This might all sound far-fetched, and golf fans will view a lot of it as heresy, for good reason. But the majors have changed before—the PGA Championship used to be match play; Jack Nicklaus has often claimed his two U.S. Amateur wins were majors; and there was a stretch when it was logistically impossible to play both the PGA Championship and British Open. Anyway, the discussion here is not about right or wrong or even what is best for golf. It is about the Tour advancing the interests of the Tour.

THE POSSIBILITIES ARE TANTALIZING. THE TOUR COULD MAKE THE PGA THE ONLY MAJOR TO BE HELD ALL OVER THE WORLD.



Years before anybody ever heard of LIV Golf, the PGA Tour took dramatic steps to solidify its hold on professional golf. The Players Championship has had a larger purse than the four majors for years. The FedEx Cup, which was first held in 2007, is the Tour's attempt to mimic the postseason drama of other sports. When Rory McIlroy won the FedEx Cup last year, he earned $18 million—more than Brooks Koepka's total for winning five majors.

That all worked quite well until the Saudis offered nine-figure guarantees to Koepka and other stars. Then it became clear: To a significant minority of top players, the Tour was just a cash dispenser. When another cash dispenser started spitting out larger bills, they ran to it.

Players who left for LIV were warned about the consequences: They would not get Official World Golf Ranking Points, which help determine major fields, or be selected for the Ryder Cup. But they didn't really believe it—and they might well have won the legal argument if the Tour hadn't settled with PIF. Monahan was counting on other governing bodies to stand with the Tour, and, while they largely did, it had to be an uncomfortable feeling.

The morality of allying with PIF is questionable. But the potential benefits are clear. Saudi money threatened the PGA Tour's preeminence. Now Saudi money can solidify it. □

SI SPORTSBOOK

PICKING A WINNER

▸ The 2023 NFL season kicks off in a matter of weeks, so now it's time to think about the '24 draft. Who will hear their name called first in Detroit next April? Here are the most recent futures odds from SI Sportsbook.

Caleb Williams, -500
The overwhelming favorite to go first, the USC Heisman winner has all the tools to be a franchise QB. The more intriguing question is which franchise. Using SI Sportsbook's preseason O/U win totals, the Cardinals (4.5) are likely to pick first. Given that Arizona just signed Kyler Murray to a contract that makes him hard to trade or cut, the top pick could be on the market.

Drake Maye, +450
The UNC quarterback threw for 4,321 yards in his first year as a starter, with 38 TDs and just seven interceptions. At 6' 4", he's limber enough to be a rushing threat: He ran for 698 yards and seven TDs last season.

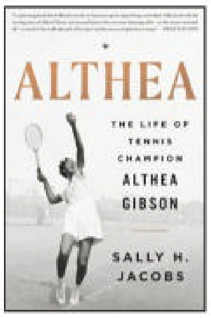
Marvin Harrison Jr.,+2500
The Ohio State wideout has the genes. His dad had 1,102 catches in his 13-year career with the Colts. Junior clearly inherited some savvy from his father, but one thing he didn't inherit was Senior's size. Harrison stands 6' 4", four inches taller than his dad.

For up-to-date odds, visit SISportsbook.com

GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

HARD ROAD

A NEW BIOGRAPHY SHOWS THAT ALTHEA GIBSON WAS A DIFFERENT KIND OF TRAILBLAZER


ALTHEA
THE LIFE OF TENNIS CHAMPION ALTHEA GIBSON
SALLY H. JACOBS

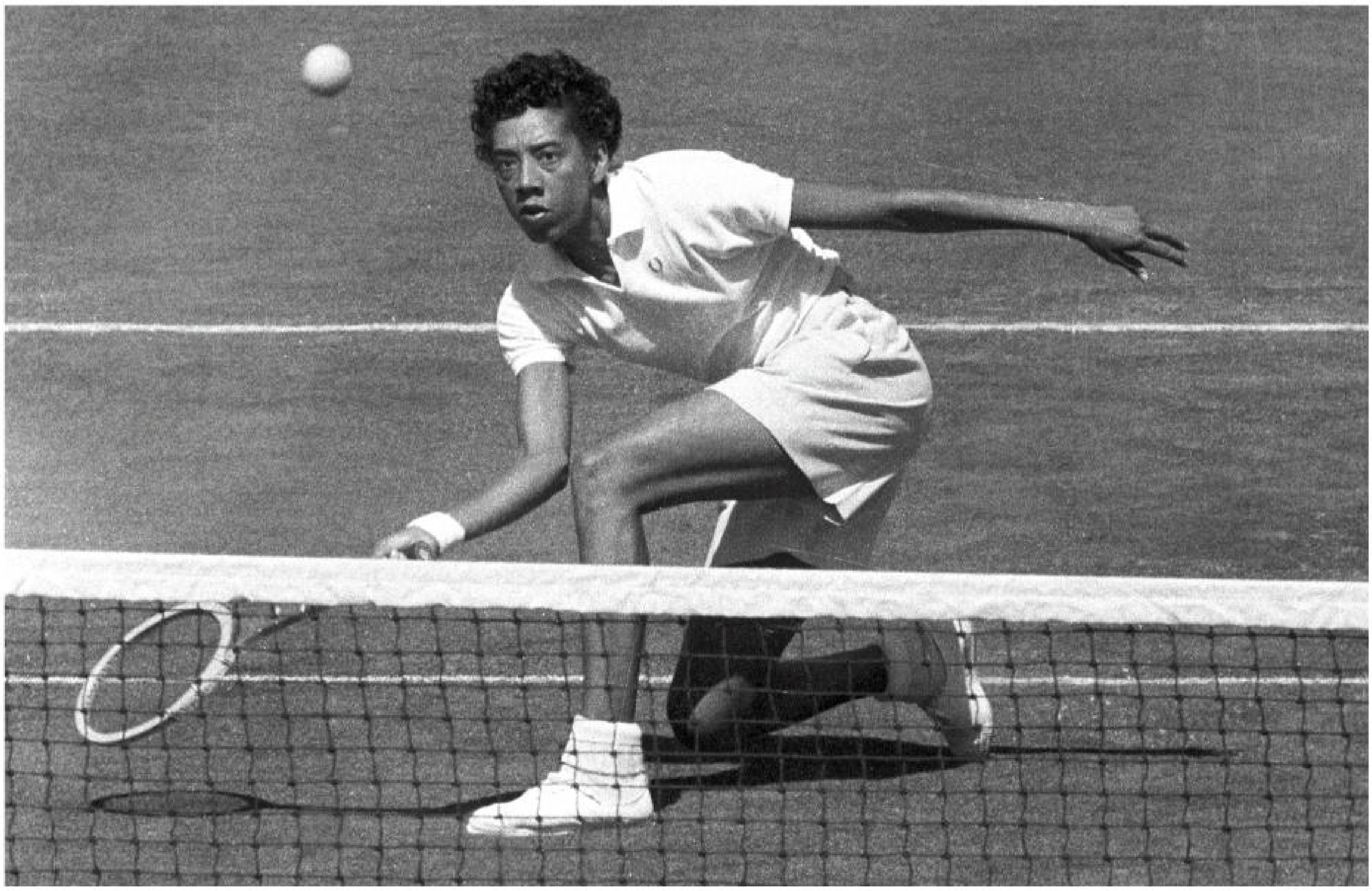
READ

ALTHEA By Sally H. Jacobs

When Branch Rickey handpicked Jackie Robinson to break baseball's color barrier in 1947, he chose him for his mien as well as his ability. Four years after Robinson's debut, Althea Gibson became the first Black woman to play at Wimbledon.

Unlike Robinson, Gibson wasn't known for having a level demeanor. She grew up ditching school, picking fights and engaging in petty larceny in Harlem. Her father taught her to fight—brutally. "[Her father, Daniel] Gibson, who prided himself on being able to knock another man out with a single blow, was sizing up his daughter's tender face, trying to settle on the best place to land his first punch," Sally H. Jacobs writes in her new book, *Althea*.

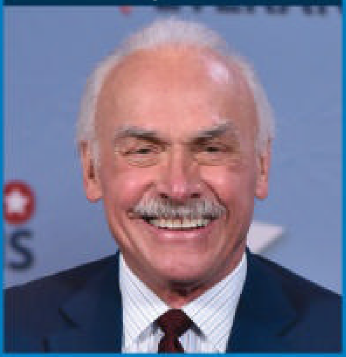
So Althea grew up a fighter, literally and figuratively. When journalists compared her to Robinson, she replied she was strictly looking out for herself. Gibson's path to the top of the tennis world (she won five Grand Slam events before the Open Era, meaning she won no prize money) was fraught. If the Black community found her rough around the edges, how would the white tennis set react to her? Everything was scrutinized—her clothes, her hair, her sexuality. Jacobs, a Pulitzer Prize finalist whose previous book was *The Other Barack*, does a wonderful job bringing to life the world Gibson grew up in and the lengths she went to bristle at it. She was an icon, but a very complicated one. And, this book reminds us, those often make for the best stories.



JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN

SALUTE TO VETERANS

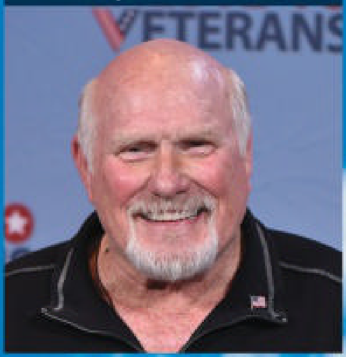
★ **Rocky Bleier** ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

U.S. ARMY

★ **Terry Bradshaw** ★



TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

★ **Greg Gadson** ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion with New York

U.S. ARMY

★ **Alejandro Villanueva** ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore

U.S. ARMY

★ **Joe Cardona** ★

U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England

U.S. NAVY

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EATS: FOOD. DRINK. CULTURE. SPORTS

GRUB QUIZ

There are two unspoken competitions among minor league baseball teams. The first is to come up with the oddest—and most marketable—name. (Rocket City Trash Pandas?) The other is to concoct the strangest dish to sell at a concession stand. For years, clubs have been shoving Tater Tots into unexpected vessels, slathering tortilla chips in unholy cheeses and forging sandwiches the size of a mascot's foam head. With that in mind, see whether you can figure out which three of the following six minor league food items are real and which aren't. Yet.

PAPPY VAN WING-KLES

Louisville Bats

Bourbon glaze is an elevated way to enjoy your chicken wings, and the Bats have figured out a way to make them even more classy: The bourbon in this glaze is the ultra-rare Pappy Van Winkle. The downside of these limited-edition wings is the price tag: $85.

FLAMIN' HOT CHEETOS CORN DOG

Winston-Salem Dash

What it lacks in looks (where in nature does that shade of red appear?), it makes up for in heat. And size. This fire-crusted wiener-on-a-stick is a foot long. Chester Cheetah approves. Your cardiologist might beg to differ.

CIDER DONUTS

Hudson Valley Renegades

How much do folks in upstate New York enjoy these tasty, autumnal cakes? Enough that the team doesn't just sell them at games. A few nights a year, it also adopts a whole new persona: the Apple Valley Cider Donuts.

DRIED GRASS-HOPPERS

Greensboro Grasshoppers

Bite-sized crunchy things and baseball go hand in hand. But if peanuts or chips are leaving you feeling like you're lacking protein, the Grasshoppers' eponymous dish of insects covered in chili-lime salt has got you covered.

10-GALLON NACHOS

Nashville Sounds

The Sounds will see your batting helmet and raise you a cowboy hat. These nachos come with all the usual toppings (shredded Nashville hot chicken is optional), served in a hat (with a removable lining). That would make any Music Row denizen proud.

BIG DILL

Richmond Flying Squirrels

Remember the Atkins diet? The Squirrels sure do. This hot dog comes sans bread. Instead, its bun, as it were, is a very large dill pickle. The dog comes topped with spicy mustard, which cuts what could be the saltiest creation in all of baseball.

COURTESY OF CARSON LESSER/WINSTON-SALEM DASH (CORN DOG); STEPHEN BRASHEAR/GETTY IMAGES (GRASSHOPPERS); GETTY IMAGES (COWBOY HAT, NACHOS); JAMES LOVING/RICHMOND FLYING SQUIRRELS (BIG DILL)

Real: corn dog, cider donuts and Big Dill. Fake: wing-kles, grasshoppers (though the Seattle Mariners sell them) and nachos.

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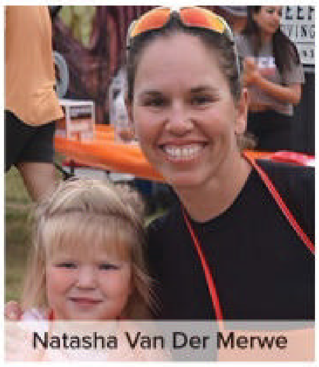
There are elite athletes, and then there are triathletes. Forget physical strength: It takes major mental fortitude to swim, cycle, and run your way to a finish line that requires more than mere endurance. Training for triathlon really means practicing three different sports that engage your muscles in three entirely different ways—and that can make properly fueling your body even more complicated.

"I was always chasing what I thought I needed to look like," says Natasha Van der Merwe, an elite endurance trainer and founder of NVDM Coaching, "versus nutrition being something that facilitates and enhances my performance in the sport, and then enhances recovery. I had this complete mental shift in food purely being fuel and using it as a tool in order for me to perform and recover."


Natasha Van Der Merwe

A former pro tennis player originally from South Africa, Van der Merwe came to triathlon later in her athletic career, but got off on a rocky start riddled with injuries. That's when she found the superfood that could help fuel her from pre to post-workout, while training or in competition: Beef.

"When I ate beef," she explains, "I felt like I recovered better from that day of training and I performed better the next day. The funniest thing is I wasn't doing it for racing until my husband pointed it out to me—and I started feeling so much better, and started preaching that to all of my athletes."

Even amateur athletes know protein is crucial for performance, but few realize that all protein is not created equally. Beef not only packs more high-quality protein per serving than most foods, but is full of critical nutrients that boost both performance and recovery. It's why sports dietitian Amy Goodson puts beef at the heart of her Sports Nutrition Playbook. Just like Van der Merwe and her triathletes, Goodson preaches the power of beef to the elite pros and teams she advises in football, baseball, hockey, and soccer.

"These days we're always looking for 'Return On Investment' on every single thing," says Goodson. "So what's your ROI on what you're putting into your body?"

Amy Goodson

Goodson says efficiency is key—if you need to eat more food to satisfy your body's caloric and nutritional needs, you'll feel more weighed down on the field or in the gym. And next to other typical protein sources like chicken, fish, or beans, there's no comparison: the same 3.5oz serving of lean beef contains around 25g of high-quality protein, nine essential amino acids, a host of vitally important micronutrients—like iron, zinc, L-carnitine, selenium, and vitamins B6 and B12—and even omega-3 fatty acids and creatine that help mental performance and build stronger muscle tissue for better endurance.

Whether you're a two-a-day workout warrior or just looking to lose weight and improve your body composition, just follow the lead of some of the highest-performing athletes on earth. The night before a grueling 70.3-mile triathlon in Texas this year, coach Van der Merwe hosted a dinner for more than 100 triathlete coaches and competitors.

The menu? Steak tacos—and plenty of them.

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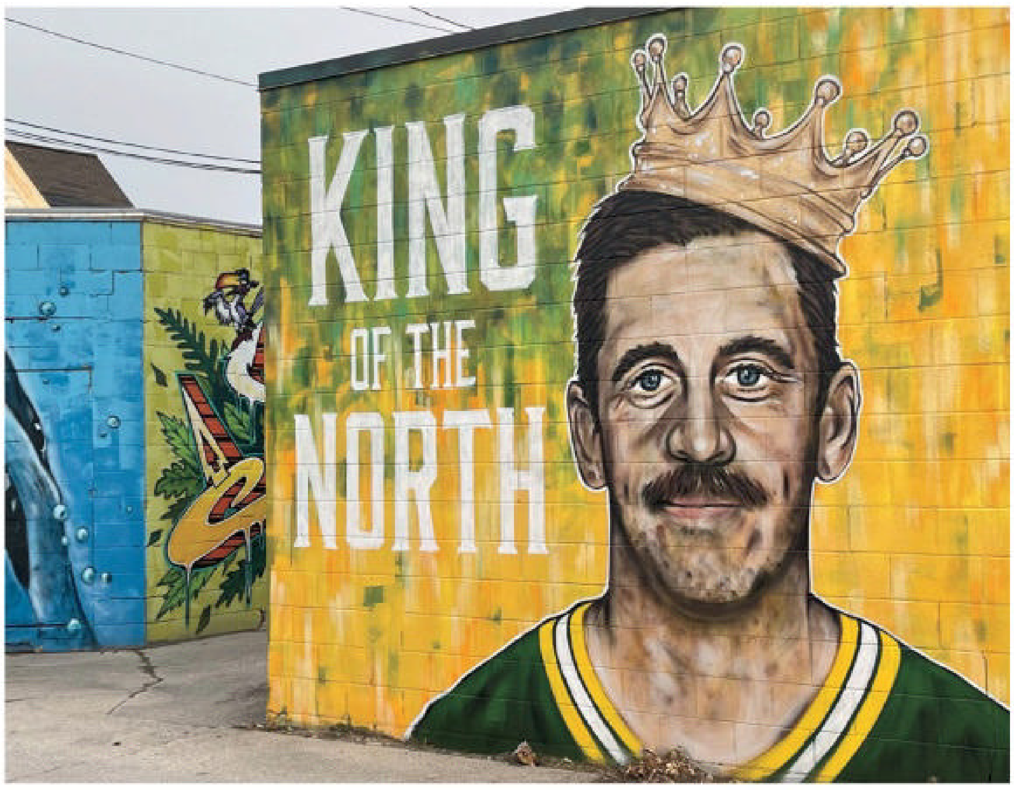
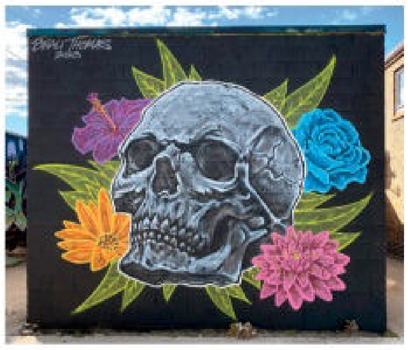


NEWSMAKERS

DEPOSED KING

AN ARTIST CAPTURED GREEN BAY'S MIXED FEELINGS OVER THE DEPARTURE OF QB AARON RODGERS

ONE HOUR AFTER Aaron Rodgers was traded from the Packers to the Jets, Beau Thomas went to Old School Bar in Green Bay, armed with black paint and a roller. Within a few minutes, the artist had erased his 2021 monument to Rodgers, titled *King of the North*, one of his two dozen downtown murals. The mural had become increasingly controversial as the Rodgers trade saga dragged on. Thomas had read some internet hate for it, and he questioned the wisdom of having anointed Rodgers a king. "I was ready to put that one behind me, honestly," he says. So after covering it in black, he returned and painted a skull and colorful flowers, a design that worked in the open spot and didn't necessarily have to be interpreted as being about the QB. "We're dealing with the loss of something and the whole theme of death and grieving," he says. "For Packers fans who need to grieve, that's a mural they can look to and kind of see some new growth with those flowers." *—Matt Verderame*



FROM TOP: KENDRA MEINERT/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN; MATT VERDERAME

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HISTORY

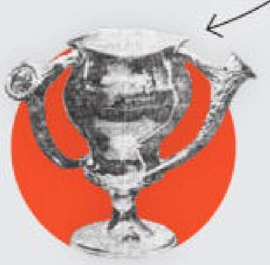
MISSING METAL

Champions
22-23
DENVER
15

THE HOURS and days after the Nuggets won their first NBA title were a whirlwind for Denver star Nikola Jokić, which explains how he lost his Finals MVP trophy *(right)* after leaving it in the equipment manager's room. Happily, it turned up the next day, joining a long list of (mostly temporarily) vanishing trophies.

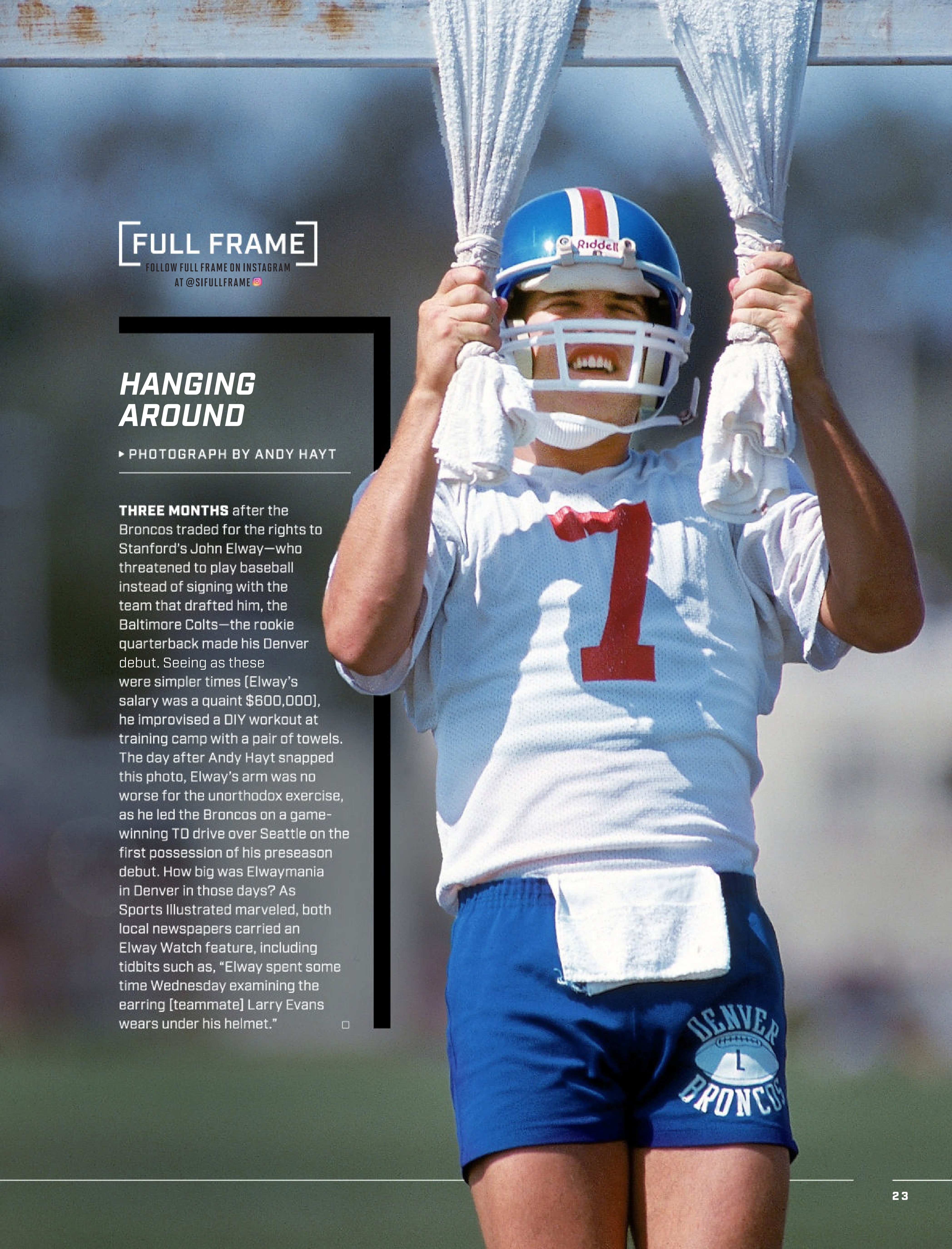
LOMBARDI TROPHY. The Ravens lost their Super Bowl hardware in 2013 but recovered it the next day. The story of the trophy given to the Colts for winning Super Bowl V is more complex. The team, then based in Baltimore, was owned by Carroll Rosenbloom, who proceeded to swap franchises with L.A. Rams owner Robert Irsay. Before Super Bowl VII, which was held in Los Angeles, the Colts sent the trophy out West to be put on display on the Queen Mary. Only it never made it. The most widely accepted explanation is that Rosenbloom, feeling he had earned it, just took it. "It just mysteriously appeared at my father's house," Rosenbloom's son Steve said in '00. The Colts replaced it with a replica.

BORG-WARNER TROPHY. The winning driver in the Indianapolis 500 receives a smaller version of this award; the actual piece stays at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, except when it is sent out on publicity tours. For 30 years, its caretaker was Jack Mackenzie, whose tenure got off to a shaky start. In 1953, as a student at Butler, Mackenzie left the trophy under his bed and went on a date. When he returned, it was gone. It eventually surfaced in the basement of his frat house. As Mackenzie told an Indianapolis TV station in '83, "They were drinking something out of it and they wouldn't tell me what it was, but I think we know, being a bunch of college students."



BRUNSWICK-BALKE COLLENDER CUP. The first NFL championship was decided by a vote, and a controversial one at that. The 1920 Akron Pros were decreed the winners and given the Brunswick-Balke Collender Cup in April '21. What happened to the trophy—which *The New York Times* called the "holy grail of sports memorabilia"—is a mystery, but Arthur Ranney, the grandson of one of the Pros' owners, suspects the worst. "Everybody also knew that Grampa Ranney was not a sentimental guy," Ranney told the *Times* in 2021. "I suspect he stuffed it in an attic and then one day threw it out. Or someone got it in a yard sale." ☐

JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (JOKIC); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (LOMBARDI); JEFFREY BROWN/ ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BORG-WARNER)



FULL FRAME

FOLLOW FULL FRAME ON INSTAGRAM
AT @SIFULLFRAME

HANGING AROUND

▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY HAYT

THREE MONTHS after the Broncos traded for the rights to Stanford's John Elway—who threatened to play baseball instead of signing with the team that drafted him, the Baltimore Colts—the rookie quarterback made his Denver debut. Seeing as these were simpler times (Elway's salary was a quaint $600,000), he improvised a DIY workout at training camp with a pair of towels. The day after Andy Hayt snapped this photo, Elway's arm was no worse for the unorthodox exercise, as he led the Broncos on a game-winning TD drive over Seattle on the first possession of his preseason debut. How big was Elwaymania in Denver in those days? As Sports Illustrated marveled, both local newspapers carried an Elway Watch feature, including tidbits such as, "Elway spent some time Wednesday examining the earring [teammate] Larry Evans wears under his helmet." ☐

FACES IN THE CROWD

By **DAN FALKENHEIM**
Photograph by
ANTHONY B. GEATHERS

SUNNY CHOI

Hometown: **Queens, N.Y.**

Date of Birth: **Nov. 10, 1988**

Sport: **Breaking**

Nickname: **B-Girl Sunny**

Olympic Qualification Rank: **6**

THERE WAS A MOMENT when Sunny Choi stood upon an overlook at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs in January, gazing at the Rocky Mountains. She held a lit Olympic torch, and it hit her. “Oh, this is real,” Choi recalls. “I’ve quit my job. I’m doing this full time. I’ve changed the trajectory of my entire life for this.”

Choi, 34, quit her day job as a global operations director at Estée Lauder to commit to breaking, a sport that will make its Olympic debut at the 2024 Paris Games. She’s on her way to qualification: In May, Choi won the U.S. national championships and took silver at the Pan American Championship in Santiago, Chile.

Away from the cardboard surfaces and city streets from which breaking blossomed, b-boys and b-girls separately face off in one-on-one battles in pro competition. Judges score contestants—who largely improvise their performances—on creativity, personality, technique, variety and musicality.

In between physics-defying floor moves, flashy footwork and frozen poses, Choi always wears a wide smile. She had to grow into it, though. When the former gymnast joined the Freaks of the Beat club as a freshman at Penn in 2007, Choi felt shy and scared. She’d sit in the corner, trying to drum up confidence and watch everyone else. Her self-described desire to “smoke everybody” won out, and she learned how to express herself creatively.

Choi lives for the moments when she’s feeling the music and hits something she’s never done before. She trains with a strength and conditioning coach three times a week to ensure her body can perform at its highest level, hoping to capture that magic in Paris.

“I’m super scared because there’s only one thing—I’m not hedging my bets anymore,” Choi says. “But it still feels right. It feels good. I’m happy.” □

TRACK AND FIELD

FAST TIMES

DESPITE BEING the son of two Olympic runners, Issam Asinga hadn't made track and field his primary focus until this year. He doesn't seem to have lost any time living up to the family name: In April, Asinga ran three sub-10-second times in the 100 meters—including a 9.83 sprint that set the all-conditions high school record and led him to a win over Olympic bronze medalist Noah Lyles. Asinga also set the national 200 high school record to close out the month. For good measure, he ran another 9.83 in June.

"I mean, *phew*," says Asinga, who recently graduated from Montverde (Fla.) Academy. "We've been talking about running fast, but we never talked about running *that* fast. That gave me confidence—I'm ready to take on anything."

Up next? The World Athletics Championships later this summer in Budapest, where Asinga is considering running for his father's native Suriname.

MVA
Nationals
ISSAM
3991

KENADEE WAYT Sport: **Track and Field** Hometown: **Wheeling, W.Va.**

Wayt, a senior sprinter at Mount Union, won the 200 meters (23.95 seconds, a school record), 400 meters (54.33) and 4 × 400-meter relay (3:44.50) at the NCAA Division III outdoor championships, tying the record set by her mother, Heather, for most wins by a Mount Union athlete at a national meet. Named the 2023 D-III Women's Outdoor Track Athlete of the Year, Wayt also won the D-III indoor title in the 200 meters in March.

ELIJAH ICKES Sport: **Baseball** Hometown: **Wahiawa, Hawai'i**

Ickes, a recently graduated senior shortstop at Kamehameha Schools Kapālama, went 3-for-3 and scored the game-winning run in a 4–3 defeat of Baldwin, leading the Warriors to their first Division I state title. Ickes led D-I with 25 runs and 21 stolen bases while also batting .500. He will play for Hawai'i.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com**.

For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@Faces_SI** on Twitter.

COURTESY OF CARA MOONEY (ASINGA); USA FOTO INC. (WAYT);
COURTESY OF WARREN ICKES (ICKES)

STILL SALTY YOUR FAVORITE PLAYER GOT TRADED?

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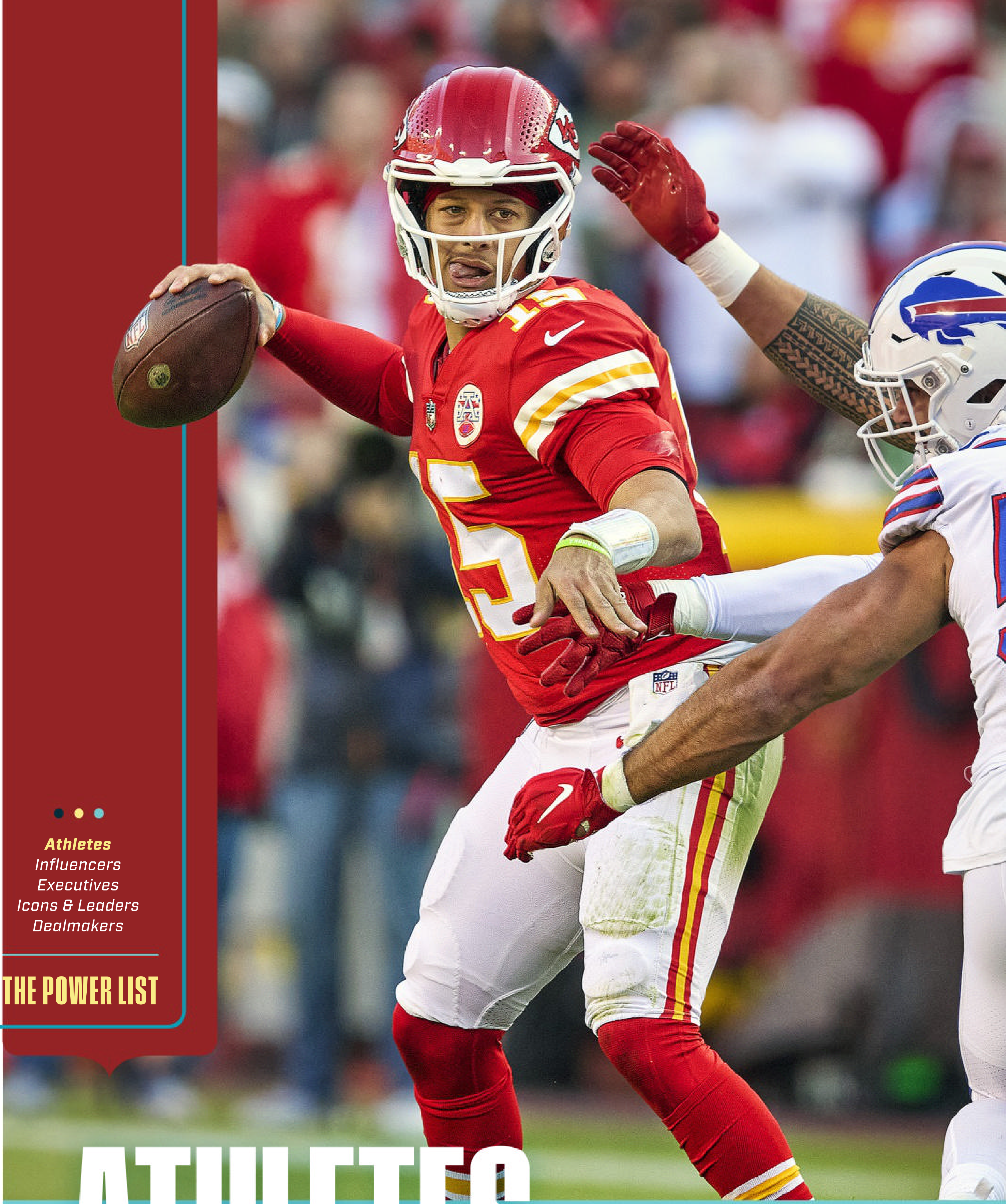
THE POWER LIST

Athletes
Influencers
Executives
Icons & Leaders
Dealmakers

Between the lines, power brokers are easy to spot—it's called keeping score. But the sports world is really shaped by those who wield influence in more nuanced ways. By controlling wealth and access. By building audiences. By parlaying on-field success into real-life clout. In 2023, these are the 50 most influential figures and forces in sports



ATHLETES

These fierce competitors have **POWER AND PRESTIGE** *through their*

BILLS
MILANO
58

reached the pinnacle of outsized impact on the field and off

BY
Conor Orr
PHOTOGRAPH BY
David E. Klutho

PATRICK MAHOMES

IF A MARKETING and image company were to create the modern athlete influencer from scratch, it very well might build someone with all the constituent parts of Patrick Mahomes.

There is the on-field component: The Chiefs' quarterback maintains a stranglehold on the public consciousness by producing clip-worthy plays with unprecedented regularity—and an ever-increasing awe factor that keeps us from becoming numb to his genius. It's hard to imagine an athlete in any sport producing more raw sports content to serve the ever-scrolling masses.

There is the career success: Mahomes now has two Super Bowl rings and a contract worth up to $503 million before his 28th birthday—all of which give him a heft few other athletes can match. He is both a young savant and one of the most decorated players in NFL history, already on the list of all-time greats. Attention must be paid to that kind of combination.

Which leads us to perhaps the most important part of Mahomes's influencer profile: He is

incredibly relatable for someone so talented and accomplished. Unlike the health-food-conscious Tom Brady or the Manning brothers—who, even before stepping onto an NFL field, carried with them a whiff of football royalty—Mahomes feels *real*. Be it his voice, which brilliant internet sleuths have matched in pitch and subject matter to that of HBO *Eastbound and Down* main character Kenny Powers, his donning of WWE wrestler–style Viper sunglasses or his love of ketchup and Coors Light, Mahomes feels very much like a man of the people.

Mahomes has influence over everything. There are defenses in the NFL designed specifically with stopping him in mind. There are general managers and coaches dreaming of finding the next iteration of Mahomes, scouring the boom-or-bust world of athletically gifted but schematically unproven prospects in college. He is years from his NFL retirement, but his business portfolio is swelling, starting with ownership stakes in a variety of nonfootball franchises: minority stakes in the Royals, MLS's Sporting Kansas City, the NWSL's Kansas City Current and (along with Naomi Osaka, Rich Paul and others) a Miami-based pro pickleball team.

And it's a safe bet that the next generation of successful quarterbacks will follow his lead behaviorally. Mahomes is a great example of how being yourself pays dividends. So long as you are also a generationally talented, multitime world champion athlete playing the country's most popular sport, of course. ▢

KING OF K.C.

Mahomes's on-field triumphs, including two Super Bowl rings, are only part of his layered influence.

KOHJIRO KINNO (MAHOMES); MICHAEL REGAN/FIFA/GETTY IMAGES (MBAPPE)

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ

✦ **EVEN WITH** Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo riding into the sunset of their careers, the beautiful game won't have to wait long for its

CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

NAOMI OSAKA

BY
L. Jon Wertheim

IT WAS THE summer of 2020, and veteran tennis journalist Ben Rothenberg seized on a thought. Naomi Osaka would make for a hell of a biography. Then 22, Osaka was emerging as a singularly beguiling figure, the personification of a globalized, multicultural, digital, complicated world.

Here was Osaka, both accessible to her millions of online followers and inscrutable, as she cast her eyes downward and (by her own admission) mumbled through interviews. She was fiercely confident but also strikingly vulnerable. She was born to a Japanese mother and Haitian father but grew up mostly in Florida and was unmistakably American, not least in her slang and diction. She was a celebrity whose tennis earnings were dwarfed by her endorsement income—her sponsors so plentiful that Nike had to relax its rules and let other brands put their patches on her tennis attire. Yet, for all the photo ops and appearances at the Met Gala,

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next icon. Mbappé is the face of the sport's future, as PSG's all-time leading goalscorer and the owner of European soccer's most lucrative contract, at $100 million per year. At 24, he already has the most followers in France, with more than 100 million, and he's received the country's highest civilian honor. Mbappé is Gen Z's first global sports superstar, and his reach is only expanding. *—Andrew Gastelum*

Osaka was just as happy to sit in the stands with other millennials at *Overwatch* tournaments in Brooklyn or the USC spring game in L.A. in April. She might characterize herself as "super-shy," but there she was, on the streets of Minneapolis, attending a protest after the murder of George Floyd by police.

What really got Rothenberg thinking about Osaka's book potential: That summer, playing in the Western & Southern Open, Osaka was shaken by the shooting of Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man police fired on in Wisconsin. Tennis seemed so trivial by comparison, and Osaka declined to play her scheduled semifinal match. Rather than default her, the tournament took the unprecedented step of halting all play, a testament to both Osaka's star power and her moral force. A few weeks later, Osaka won the U.S. Open, marking the third major title of her career, all but consecrating her eventual entrance into the sport's Hall of Fame. A few months after that, Osaka brought her power, athleticism and fearlessness to bear and won the 2021 Australian Open, looking for all the world like the heir apparent to Serena Williams, a dominating, generational star transcending sports.

Rothenberg figured, rightly, that he had timed it all awfully well. And then Osaka's story began whipsawing like a mechanical bull. That 2021 Australian Open held two and a half years ago? It would mark Osaka's last—and, who knows, potentially final?—tennis title. That spring, before the French Open in Paris, Osaka announced she would not attend mandated press conferences, as those sessions were at odds with her mental health. Amid controversies and threats of fines, she played one match and then withdrew from the event.

As defending champ, she lost tearfully at the U.S. Open. By the end of the year, she had fallen out of the top 10 in the WTA rankings. By the end of 2022—in which she played sporadically and won barely half the time—she had fallen out of the top 40. By that time, she had announced that she and her longtime boyfriend, the rapper Cordae, were expecting a child and she would be playing no tennis in '23.

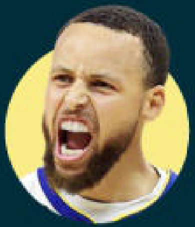
There was a time not long ago when an athlete's relevance and income moved in more or less direct proportion to their playing results. The rules of the road were simple. Winning brings opportunities (and triggers bonus clauses and beckons biographies). Fail to win, and opportunities dry up. Stop playing entirely, and the gravy train moves on. Beyond that, an athlete speaking openly about their social anxiety and mental health challenges might as well be radioactive to marketers. How can you represent a brand if you're not willing to be front-facing?

And yet Osaka the pathbreaker—on brand as ever; forgive the pun—has taken this conventional wisdom and batted it back with great force. Her lack of tennis has not dented her earning potential at all. Quite the contrary. Osaka Inc. is as strong as ever. Her list of sponsors, partnerships and investments—too numerous to chronicle fully here—now includes more than 20 brands, from Nike, Victoria's Secret and Beats to jeans and vegan ramen. For the third straight year, she was the world's top-earning female athlete, making an estimated $50 million annually from off-court pursuits.

In keeping with the times, Osaka knows that the real contemporary power is not wealth but influence. So it is, she is not simply slapping her name, image and likeness on brands, but is also often involved in product designs and marketing campaigns. And she is spreading her gospel. She has her own media production company, Hana Kuma. She finds investments that are consistent with her values, not least her partial ownership of the NWSL's North Carolina Courage. In 2022 she divorced IMG, the management giant that signed her as a teenager, and didn't decamp to a rival agency, but, rather, founded her own agency, Evolve. As she said at the time of launch, "Evolve represents the evolution of not just my business career, but also the way athletes can control their destiny."

Not all of her self-controlled destiny has been a success. As part of a deal with FTX, Osaka received equity and compensation in the form of crypto. When FTX collapsed spectacularly last year, she was left holding worthless digital currency and was among the celebrity endorsers named in an $11 billion class-action lawsuit. She has taken equity stakes in companies that have yet to find traction. And critics are within their

STEPHEN CURRY



Even casual fans know how the four-time NBA champ dominates on the court. But it doesn't stop there for the greatest shooter of all time. In 2019, the Warriors guard and his wife, Ayesha, launched the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, which seeks to end childhood hunger, close the literacy gap and provide kids safe places to play. The 35-year-old committed $6 million to help fund the golf programs at Howard last year and also cochaired former First Lady Michelle Obama's "When We All Vote" campaign.
—Chris Herring

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

rights to wonder whether all of this (over?) extension is a symptom or cause of her stalled tennis career. In 2022, Osaka parted ways with coaches and trainers who wondered quietly why they were more motivated than the world-class athlete employing them.

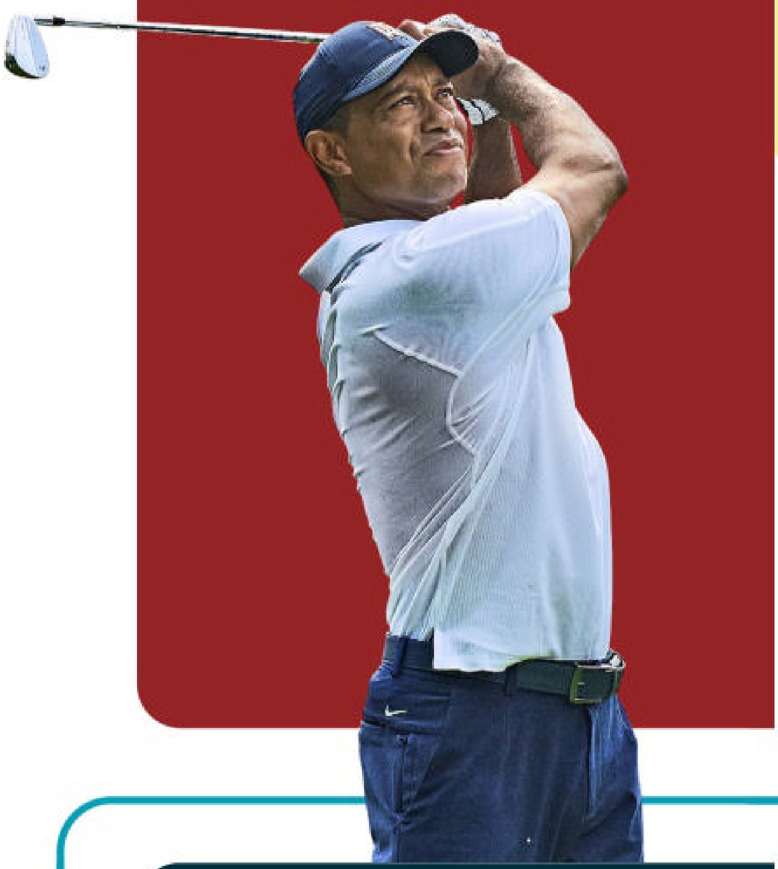
Rothenberg, the journalist, has watched it all play out in real time. If his book morphs into something altogether different from a straightforward portrait of an athlete in full bloom, it may ultimately end up as something more interesting. Among his observations: "Naomi's competitiveness has been a constant since childhood, and I think she's channeled a way to scratch that itch through her off-court ventures as well. She can score wins in lots of different ways outside of tennis, whether it's landing a magazine cover, being named a Met Gala host or having a clothing collection launch. And there are definitely perceptible rankings to measure her off-court business success. . . . I think those sorts of challenges are as appealing to her, if not more so, than the actual money she's raking in."

That is, Osaka contains multitudes. And she is adamant that her interests and influence can coexist with her tennis. She will become a mother this summer and she has targeted the 2024 Australian Open as her return date. The tournament starts the same week as the publication of Rothenberg's book, *Naomi Osaka: Her Journey to Finding Her Power and Her Voice.*

MONICA SCHIPPER/GETTY IMAGES FOR LOTTE NEW YORK PALACE (OSAKA); HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES (JAMES)

LEBRON JAMES

✦ **IN FEBRUARY,** the four-time NBA champ broke the league's all-time scoring record by surpassing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 38,387 career point total. But even without a basketball in hand, James, 38, is a standard bearer, by repeatedly giving athletes new ways to think about business and how they use their star power. In 2020 he created his own film and TV production company, SpringHill. He's inked shorter contracts to maintain flexibility and force accountability on how teams build around him, and helped set a precedent for superstars signing on to play alongside one another. (His desire to play with his son Bronny could shape NBA roster decisions for the next two years.) None of this gets into James's social justice work or the thing that he claims to be most proud of: In '18, his foundation opened the I Promise School in Akron, Ohio, which serves at-risk students and offers career-placement help for the parents of the children. —C.H.



TIGER WOODS

✦ **THE VIDEO** lasted all of three seconds, but there could have been a thousand questions packed into that short glimpse of Woods swinging a golf club. Posted to his Twitter account in November 2021, it was the first time the public had seen him in action since his horrific car crash nine months earlier. It garnered nearly eight million views and helped him earn an $8 million bonus from a PGA Tour fund that rewards players for social media engagement. A year later Woods again was awarded the top prize, increased to $15 million, despite having played just nine official rounds of golf in '22.

It speaks to Woods's popularity as he approaches his 48th birthday this December. He rarely plays, yet still has great influence. Much of it is due to his 82 PGA Tour wins, his 15 major titles and the way he dominated the game for so many years. But Woods is also popular among his peers and took on a leadership role in response to the LIV Golf threat that will result in more purse money overall. And if money is power, Woods's impact will be lasting: According to *Forbes*, last year he joined LeBron James and Michael Jordan on the short list of athlete billionaires. —*Bob Harig*

SHOHEI OHTANI

✦ **HE IS** the most valuable player in baseball, earning $30 million this year to hit and pitch, and another $40 million in endorsements as the game's biggest international star. As a free agent at age 29 after this season, his value is going to reach record heights—and the chase to sign him could reshape the game's power balance for years to come. After six years with the Angels, Ohtani will attract a bidding war among the Angels, Dodgers, Padres, Giants, Yankees, Mets, Red Sox and any other team willing to go well beyond the record $426.5 million contract owned by current teammate Mike Trout. —*Tom Verducci*

LIONEL MESSI

FROM HIS magic on the field to his money and majestic presence off it, Messi reigns as a fixed figure of influence in the world's most popular sport. No player owns more hardware than the 43 trophies he has accumulated across his career, which includes 12 league titles between Barcelona and Paris St.-Germain, seven Ballon d'Or awards and the

ERICK W. RASCO (2)

LOS ANGELES
25
Wilson

LAYSHIA CLARENDON

✦ **THERE ARE** few figures in pro sports as unapologetically vocal as the Sparks guard, who uses all pronouns. The 10-year WNBA veteran is the league's first openly transgender player and has used their own experience to advocate for the inclusion, safety and support of LGBTQ athletes. Clarendon, 32, went public with his top surgery in 2021, writing in an Instagram post, "my freedom is your freedom because none one of us are free until we are all free." That perfectly sums up Clarendon's ethos as a groundbreaking figure in the league and an unwavering champion for progress in sports. —*Clare Brennan*

ALEX MORGAN

After being at the forefront of the USWNT's pay equity fight, the 34-year-old launched the Alex Morgan Foundation to empower girls and support mothers. Laura Wolf Stein, who helps run the foundation, says they want to address "why girls don't enter or stay in sports after 12 or 13." Some factors are economic; others social. All are fixable if someone leads the way. —*Michael Rosenberg*

NNEKA AND CHINEY OGWUMIKE

✦ **THEY HAVE** shone together in both college (Stanford) and in the pros (Sparks), but the Ogwumike sisters have also blazed their own distinct trails off the court. As president of the Women's National Basketball Players Association since 2016, Nneka *(below, right),* deftly led negotiations for a groundbreaking CBA in '20 that included one of the first comprehensive maternity benefit plans in pro sports, and the 33-year-old is often the voice of players' public stances on questions of social justice. Chiney, 31, has built a career in media, becoming the first Black woman to host a national radio show for ESPN. And both have dominated on the court. —*Emma Baccellieri*

LOS ANGELES
13
LOS ANGELES
30
EquiTrust

2022 World Cup that likely cemented him as the greatest player of all time. The 36-year-old superstar has been ranked in the top three of *Forbes*'s highest-paid athlete list for eight years running, and his jersey can be found in every corner of the globe—after his departure from PSG to sign with MLS side Inter Miami in early June, his new pink-and-black kit is sure to become a bestseller worldwide. And in terms of sheer influence, no one has made a bigger impact on soccer in the 21st century than the Argentina captain, who reminds the world that no amount of statistical analysis or physical training in today's modern game can match the jaw-dropping enchantment of pure, poetic talent. —A.G.

CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES (MESSI); JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (CLARENDON, NNEKA OGWUMIKE); ERICK W. RASCO (MORGAN); ADAM PANTOZZI/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (CHINEY OGWUMIKE)

FUTURE POWER PLAYERS

Gen Z may have its share of stereotypes, but the kids are gonna be all right: A **FRESH-FACED GROUP** *of ultratalented, social-savvy and downright impressive athletes are already making their mark as they get ready to dominate the sports world (and future versions of the Power List) for decades to come*

BRYCE AND BRONNY JAMES

LeBron James has made his intentions clear: He wants to play with his sons, Bronny, 18 *(right)*, and Bryce, 16 *(left)*. “The Chosen Sons” are well on their way to fulfilling their dad’s dream. At 6' 3", 180 pounds, the elder will start at USC in the fall. Already 6' 6", Bryce dunks emphatically as he heads to Campbell Hall in L.A. for his junior year.

CONNOR BEDARD

The likely No. 1 NHL draft pick, 17, had nine goals and 14 assists to lead Canada to gold at the World Juniors in January.

ALYSSA THOMPSON

The first high schooler drafted No. 1 in the NWSL, the 18-year-old Angel City forward has a team-high three goals and one assist through 12 games in 2023.

CAITLIN CLARK

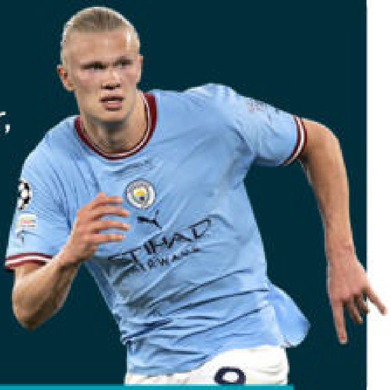
Iowa’s 21-year-old star and reigning Player of the Year will return for her senior year after her shooting and swagger ignited the 2023 NCAA tournament.

ROSE ZHANG

Within 13 days, Zhang, 20, won her second straight NCAA title and the Mizuho Americas Open, becoming the first in 72 years to win in her LPGA pro debut.

ERLING HAALAND

The 6' 4" Norwegian striker, 22, scored 52 goals in 53 games in his debut season with Man City—and capped it all off with a Champions League title.



VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

The 7' 3" prodigy from France is only 19, but he’ll enter the NBA with Hall of Fame expectations thanks to his versatile skill set and unprecedented talent.

DAVID E. KLUTHO (BRYCE JAMES); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BRONNY JAMES); MINAS PANAGIOTAKIS/GETTY IMAGES (BEDARD); RICH GRAESSLE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (ZHANG); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (THOMPSON); VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES (HAALAND); GREG NELSON (CLARK); STEVE MARCUS/GETTY IMAGES (WEMBANYAMA)

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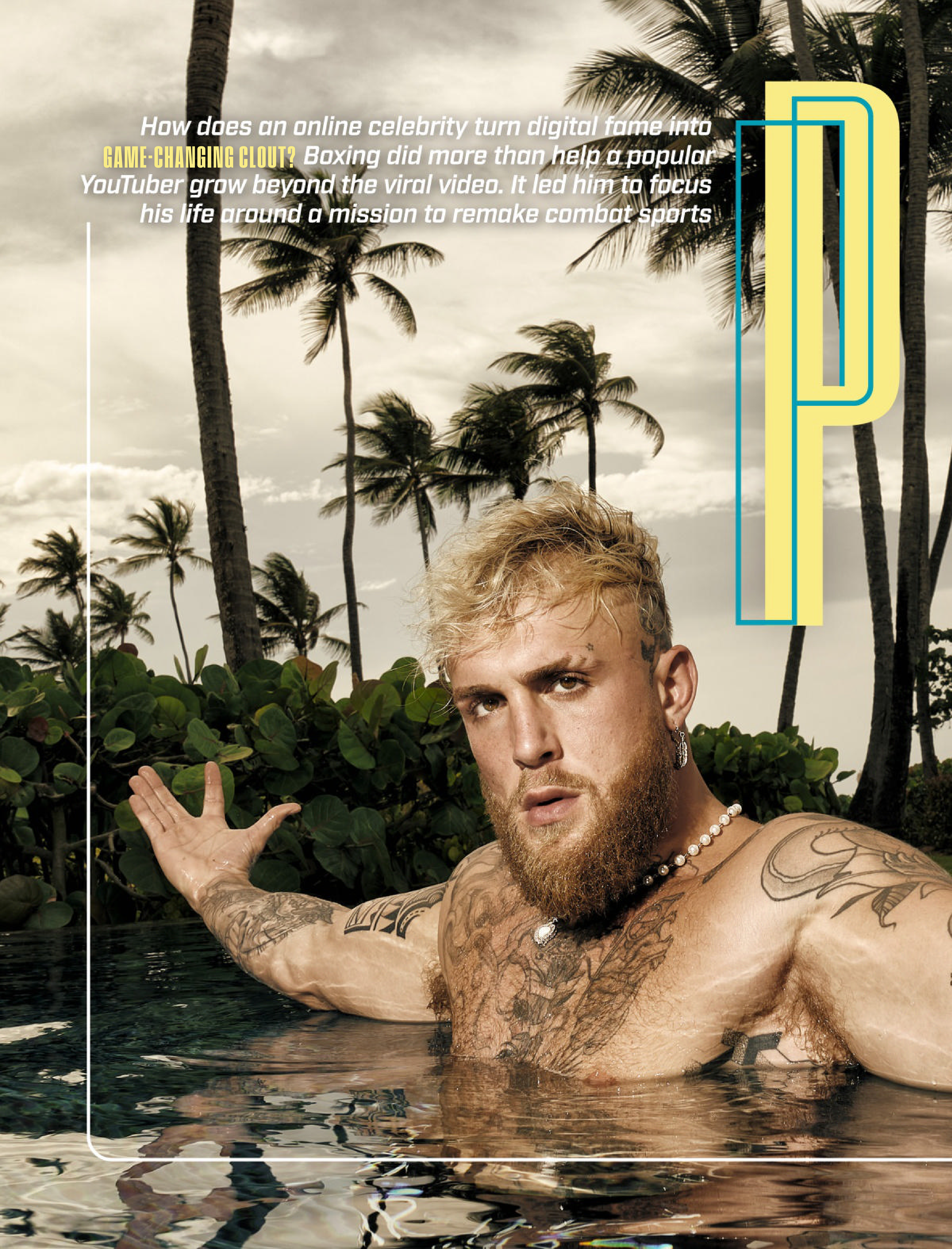

How does an online celebrity turn digital fame into **GAME-CHANGING CLOUT?** *Boxing did more than help a popular YouTuber grow beyond the viral video. It led him to focus his life around a mission to remake combat sports*

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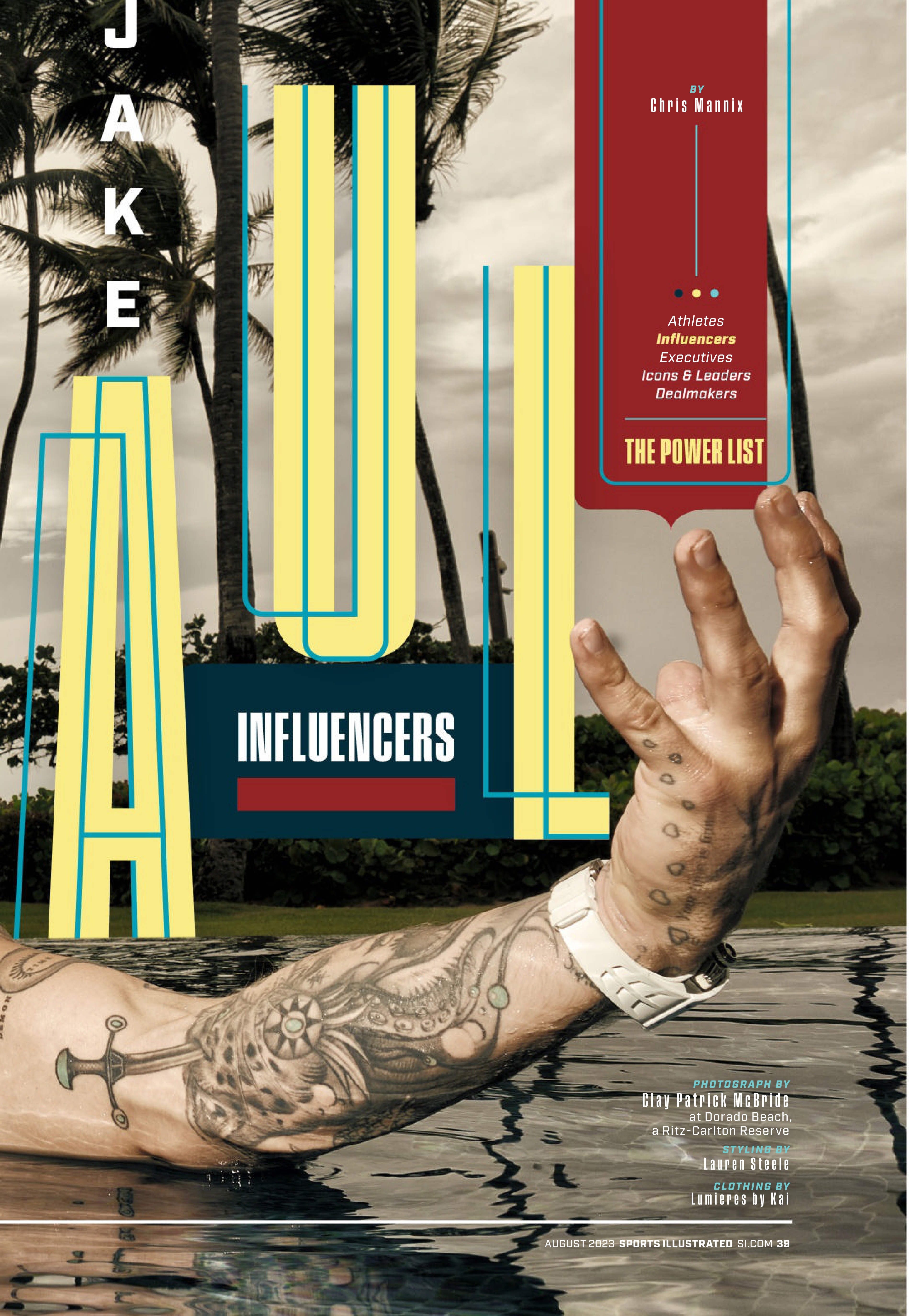


JAKE PAUL

INFLUENCERS

BY
Chris Mannix

Athletes
Influencers
Executives
Icons & Leaders
Dealmakers

THE POWER LIST

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Clay Patrick McBride
at Dorado Beach,
a Ritz-Carlton Reserve
STYLING BY
Lauren Steele
CLOTHING BY
Lumieres by Kai

“YOU KNOW WHAT’S FUNNY?” Jake Paul asks, directing the question at no one in particular. It’s early May, and Paul is in Dallas, corralled in a locker room in American Airlines Center. A pair of cameramen, there to capture Paul’s movements before a press conference to promote his August fight against former UFC star Nate Diaz, sit across from him. Brandon Amato, Paul’s creative director, is flipping coat hangers onto hooks in a corner. Eventually, Paul’s gaze settles on Marcos Guerrero. In 2019, Paul, then fully immersed in the YouTube world, hired Guerrero as an editor. When Paul pivoted to boxing, he told Guerrero he wouldn’t be producing as much content. He asked whether Guerrero had ever been an assistant. As training for the job, he sent Guerrero to shadow the assistant for Paul’s brother, Logan. After a few weeks Guerrero was ready. His first task: Fire Paul’s existing assistant.

“Donald,” Paul says, answering his own question. “Nate’s middle name is Donald.” He nods his head, channeling Eminem’s final freestyle in *8 Mile*. “This guy’s a gangster, his real name’s Donald,” Paul raps. As a boxer, the 26-year-old Paul is a novice. As an irritant, he’s a seasoned pro. In 2021, Paul sparked a brawl after swiping a hat off Floyd Mayweather’s head at a press conference to promote Mayweather’s exhibition match against Logan. Months later, before a scheduled fight with Tommy Fury, Paul offered to pay Fury $500,000 if Fury beat him. If Fury lost, he would have to legally change his name to “Tommy Fumbles.” When Fury’s girlfriend, influencer Molly-Mae Hague, posted a photo of the couple holding their newborn, Paul hopped in the comments, writing, “Just in time to watch your dad get knocked out.”

Bets, Paul has discovered, tend to resonate. Before his first fight with Tyron Woodley, Paul

POWER PLAY

Paul’s win over Woodley in their 2021 rematch ended with one of the most devastating knockouts of the year.

CHANDAN KHANNA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

insisted that the loser get a tattoo declaring his love for the winner (Woodley, after getting out-pointed, had I LOVE JAKE PAUL inked to his middle finger). It's an attention-grabbing tactic Paul has noticed others borrowing. Weeks before facing off in March, Gervonta Davis challenged Ryan Garcia to bet his purse. "And that's all anyone was talking about," says Paul. "It gets mainstream attention. It sticks."

As Paul speaks, his manager, Nakisa Bidarian, pulls up a chair alongside him. Bidarian, a stoic, Stanley Tucci type, is partners with Paul in Most Valuable Promotions, a promotional outfit, and the unofficial head of Jake Paul Inc. He wants to talk business. "Is that orange Celsius?" Bidarian asks, pointing to an unopened can on the table. In recent years Bidarian, a former UFC exec, has spearheaded the effort to evolve Paul from volatile YouTuber to a more corporate-friendly product. Celsius, marketed as a healthier energy drink, recently signed Paul to a long-term endorsement deal. The goal is for other big brands to be right behind them.

"I THINK HE'S GENUINELY GOT THE BOXING BUG," SAYS PAUL'S FIRST PROMOTER. "HE'S FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE SPORT."

The conversation shifts to the Diaz fight. Specifically, which celebrities will show up. Paul rattles off a list of possibilities. Aaron Rodgers. Jack Harlow. Lolo Jones. Joey Bosa. Nick Bosa. During fight week, Paul suggests Luka Dončić, the Mavericks star, host some events. Paul's gargantuan social media following—20 million subscribers on YouTube, 23 million followers on Instagram, another 17 million on TikTok—affords him an endless list of contacts.

When the press conference begins, Paul slips into character. He pulls a clapping toy monkey out from under a table. "I think this is what's going on in Nate's brain," he says. When Diaz speaks, Paul looks at him quizzically. "I don't speak Stockton," Paul says, referencing Diaz's central California hometown. A member of Paul's entourage, posing as a reporter, grabs a microphone.

"Derek from Betr Media," says Derek Sullivan, a content creator for Betr, Paul's microbetting site. "Nate, I've been trying to get on this undercard. I was wondering if I could fight your brother, Nick. If he's anything like you I think I'd beat his f---ing ass."

There is one serious moment. When a reporter asks Diaz whether he has confidence knowing he wouldn't be sharing the ring with a Hall of Famer, Paul bristles. "I don't know who you are to say I'm not a future Hall of Fame boxer," says Paul. He continues: "I've done more for the sport than any boxer in current history. What's Floyd Mayweather done for women's boxing? I've changed the entire game. I've brought a new 70 million followers to the sport. I've put on bigger pay-per-views than some of these 'Hall of Fame' guys. . . . And I just got started."

Skeptics of Paul's commitment to fighting have long vanished. Last February, Paul took the first loss of his career, a split-decision defeat to Fury. He didn't quit. He doubled down. He shook up his team, bringing back Shane Mosley, who trained Paul for his first pro fight. In Puerto Rico, where Paul has lived since 2021, Paul built a gym out of an abandoned medical supply building, where experienced pros like

J'Leon Love and Rydell Booker provide regular sparring. In August he will face Diaz, part of a multifight plan that includes a rematch with Fury and an all-influencer showdown with KSI. “I think he's genuinely got the boxing bug,” says Eddie Hearn, who promoted Paul's first pro fight. “He's fallen in love with the sport.”

On the business side, Paul has elevated Amanda Serrano, a seven-division world title holder whose profile—and bank account—has swelled significantly since signing with MVP. Last spring, Paul copromoted the lightweight showdown between Serrano and Katie Taylor, which sold out Madison Square Garden and drew a then record 1.5 million viewers. He's hoping to unionize fighters across combat sports. He's engaged Dana White over UFC fighter pay. Recently, Paul partnered with the Professional Fighters League (PFL), a small MMA outfit, creating a new fighter-friendly pay-per-view model. PFL's first significant signing: Francis Ngannou, the former UFC heavyweight champ.

In a few short years, Paul has turned himself into a formidable presence in combat sports. But that world is complicated. Messy. A celebrity like Paul, with so many outside interests, may not have the stomach for it. “A guy like Jake, his attention span is so limited,” says Hearn. “If you want to succeed in boxing, it's a hundred percent all your focus and time to be at the top end, like anything. And he can't do that because his mind is just everywhere.”

Informed of Hearn's comments, Paul smirks. “Eddie Hearn is not the person to ever judge

NBA ON TNT CREW

AMERICAN EXPRESS HALFTIME REPORT
TNT

COURTESY OF TNT

✦ **YOU'D BE** hard-pressed to think of any sports program that's enjoyed the level of familiarity, consistency and laughter-inducing moments that *Inside the NBA* has. The show has featured host Ernie Johnson for nearly 25 years, and later added former players Shaquille O'Neal, Charles Barkley and Kenny Smith, who provide endless pre- and postgame entertainment. Sometimes the crew angers the players they're paid to analyze due to their candor and sharp critiques; other times they crack inside jokes or annoy dialed-in, die-hard fans for their lack of attention to detail. But they've also spoken poignantly when members of the show have lost loved ones and when societal events have overshadowed basketball. The long-standing and oft-imitated show has also mixed in an array of other voices at times in recent years—most notably WNBA star Candace Parker—but the thrust of the panel remains the same. And it certainly won't be a surprise if the group ends up being inducted into the Hall of Fame because of their widespread popularity and enduring influence all these years later. —C.H.

THE MANNING FAMILY

THEY WERE already the royal family of quarterbacking: patriarch Archie, his sons Peyton and Eli *(right)*, and—debuting this fall at Texas—grandson and five-star prospect Arch. But the Manning clan is much more now, the centerpiece of a media empire that has made stars of even the nonplaying members (Cooper, the elder brother of Peyton and Eli, is the funniest one).

It's not just the

Jake Paul. He's a bipolar Jake Paul fan. One moment he's like, 'Yeah, this is amazing.' The next moment he's like, 'F--- this kid.' Paul pauses. "He'll see. I'm here to stay."

* * *

LOGAN PAUL LOVES his brother, a statement that sounds wholly unnecessary—until you hear what comes next. "Growing up, on paper, Jake was a failure," says Logan. "There's no other way to put it. Jake was an on-paper failure." As teenagers growing up Westlake, Ohio, the Pauls dabbled in social media, first with the now defunct Vine, then YouTube. For Logan, it was a means to an end. "Social media for me has always been a stepping stone to become one of the biggest entertainers in the world," says Logan. And Jake? "Truthfully," says Logan, "I don't know what Jake's intention was."

Money, Paul says. In the early 2010s, when Paul's Vine following stretched into six figures, representatives from *Doodle Jump*, a kid-friendly platforming game, contacted Paul about promoting it, offering $200 for a six-second Vine. "I was like, 'What the f---?' says Paul. "I was stoked to get the $200. I was like, 'This is insane.' Because I was used to landscaping for $20 an hour or snow plowing for $20 an hour, cleaning gutters. All I had to do was post a Vine for $200?" When *Doodle Jump*'s downloads soared, the company asked for another. Paul figured he'd go big. He asked for $10,000. "They were like, 'Yep, no problem,' " says Paul.

Boxing started as a similar cash grab. "My purpose at the beginning was to make a bunch of money and f---ing buy a Lamborghini and have watches and s---," he says. Paul's pay-per-views (he's headlined four of them) have, to varying degrees, been successful. *Forbes* estimated Paul raked in $40 million for three fights in 2021. Paul bragged he made $30 million to fight Fury.

Quickly, the sport offered something else: purpose. As a teenager, Paul cycled through the usual, starry-eyed career plans. He wanted to open an auto-body shop. After a couple of years of high school football, Paul dreamed of the NFL. For a bit, he talked about becoming a Navy SEAL. When the YouTubing took off, Logan moved to Los Angeles. Jake went, too. He landed a gig on Disney Channel's *Bizaardvark* and founded Team 10, an entertainment collective,

OLIVIA DUNNE

✦ **THE TOP** NIL earner in NCAA women's sports, the LSU gymnast has a seven-figure income, thanks to 7.5 million followers on TikTok and 4.1 million on Instagram. Despite predictable backlash—including criticism from Stanford Hall of Fame basketball coach Tara VanDerveer—Dunne, 20, has built a model for athletes to establish a brand, not to mention make money, without the prospect of a hefty professional payday. *—Mark Bechtel*

ubiquitous, often hilarious, ads (Caesars Sportsbook, ESPN, Frito-Lay) that feature some or all of the Mannings. After having huge success with ESPN vehicles *Peyton's Places* and the *Monday Night Football* alternative ManningCast, Omaha Productions—the entertainment company Peyton launched four years after his 2016 retirement—has expanded both formats to other personalities and sports. Omaha is now a $400 million production powerhouse.

—Stephen Cannella

KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (MANNINGS); JEROME MIRON/USA TODAY SPORTS (DUNNE)

MAN I

Paul was wealthy before boxing, but he says the sport brought invaluable discipline to his "reckless" life.

and moved everyone into an $18,000 per month mansion in a tony neighborhood outside L.A.

It was lucrative. But, ultimately, unfulfilling. The days got repetitive: Wake up, make a video. "I made one every day for more than 800 days," says Paul. There were phone calls. Business meetings. Maybe an audition. By 8 p.m., everyone in the house was drinking. That's when the trouble started. Police were routinely called over noise complaints. In 2017, Paul was fired from *Bizaardvark* after a local TV station reported on Paul's neighbors considering a public nuisance lawsuit. In '18, an ex-girlfriend accused Paul of mental and emotional abuse, and in '21 two other women accused him of sexual assault. (Of the first allegation, Paul said in 2018, "We did a lot of messed-up things to hurt each other." He has denied the second allegation, and a representative told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED he had no comment on the third.) In '20, the FBI raided Paul's house looking for evidence from a looting incident in Arizona. (No federal charges were brought.)

Says Paul now, "I was really reckless. I didn't care about my life. I didn't care about anything that I was doing, really. I was not in a good place. I was lost and chasing all the wrong things to try to find myself." Asked about regrets, Paul winces. "There was a lot of fake s--- I did for videos that I don't like, that I did for attention," says Paul. "Like getting fake-married. I literally got fake-married for f---ing attention."

Boxing gave Paul direction. In 2020, he moved BJ Flores, a former cruiserweight contender who helped Paul train for his fight with AnEsonGib, in with him. When the pandemic

"I WOULD SIGN INFLUENCERS UNDERNEATH ME AND HELP THEM GET FAMOUS. I WAS LIKE, 'I COULD LITERALLY DO THE SAME THING IN BOXING.' "

Promotion, Paul says, is a big part of it. "Make people interested in the *why*," he says. "People care about stories. Bigger headlines. More articles. It's all a numbers game. It's all a clicks game at the end of the day."

Sharing that influence, Paul says, came naturally. "With Team 10, I would sign influencers underneath me and help them get famous," he says. "So I was like, 'I could literally do the same thing in boxing.' " Women's boxing intrigued him. Paul grew up a fan of Ronda Rousey, who for several years was one of the biggest names in UFC. Showtime Sports president Stephen Espinoza suggested Paul look at Serrano, a champion with little profile. Paul added her to his undercard for his first fight against Woodley. Paid her six figures. Two fights later Serrano made seven figures against Taylor.

Lou DiBella, a longtime fighter rep who promoted Serrano for several years, admits, somewhat begrudgingly, Paul has become a force. "No network was willing to do with Amanda what he was willing to do," DiBella says. "No matter how much I wanted to help her, I couldn't help her like that." DiBella, incidentally, represents Heather Hardy, who will

hit, Flores and Paul ramped up the training. His YouTube output slowed. His sparring picked up. "When an individual finds their purpose, they become the best version of themselves," says Logan. "Boxing for him is that purpose. Jake devoted his body and mind to it. And he's become a really great version of himself."

It could have ended there. *Rich kid uses influence to penetrate a barrierless sport* is an interesting story but hardly original, particularly today, when influencer boxing is its own cottage industry. Paul wanted more. In boxing, Paul saw a decaying sport badly in need of innovation. "The same feeling I had when I started vlogging was the same feeling I had when I started boxing," says Paul. "Everyone was doing the same s---, and it just wasn't popping. It's just this old, outdated s--- that no one's changed."

SUPER
OKLYN
PRBLM
CHILD

CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE (2)

earn her first six-figure payday when she challenges Serrano on the Paul-Diaz undercard.

There are others. Montana Love turned a knockout win on a Paul undercard into a multi-fight deal with Hearn. Shadasia Green, a 168-pound contender, has seen her profile spike since signing with MVP. Lightweight Ashton Sylve, 19, is Paul’s first attempt to develop a prospect. Social media, Paul believes, is the bridge between success and stardom. “What’s crazy about it is it seems so simple,” he says. “It’s just post and tell the story and create content together. But a lot of people just don’t know how to do that in an organic, authentic way. I think that’s the secret sauce. Why doesn’t everybody do that? I guess it’s not that easy. I don’t know.”

• • •

SHOULD WE GET A FERRARI?”

It’s mid-May, and Paul is stretched out on a bed in a villa inside the Ritz-Carlton resort in Dorado, Puerto Rico. A photographer, Clay Patrick McBride, leans against a wall across the room. Paul came prepared for this shoot. He studied McBride’s work. With Kobe Bryant. Jay-Z. Arturo Gatti. “This has got to be a step down,” says Paul.

McBride, perhaps half-jokingly, suggests they photograph Paul in a Ferrari. Paul scrolls through his contacts. He dials, putting the phone on speaker. A man whom Paul identifies as the largest car dealer in Puerto Rico picks up. Paul explains the situation. He asks whether a Ferrari is available. The dealer invites Paul to the lot, where a rare model, one of three ever made, at least according to him, would be waiting.

It’s moments like this that make you wonder whether Paul really is long for boxing. His portfolio is wide. He has Betr and a twice-monthly sports YouTube talk show. Recently, Mandalay Pictures, the company behind *Air*, announced a deal for Paul to star in a feature film. Needling White over fighter pay makes for good content. Effecting real change is a

RING MAKER

Paul’s support of fighters like Serrano (far right) has elevated popularity and pay in women’s boxing.

THE SPORTSBOOKS

IT WAS the end of sports prohibition, so to speak, and just as bootleggers and speakeasies were replaced by importers and bars, bookies and OTB parlors gave way to apps and the benign-sounding

ERICK W. RASCO (PAUL); GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES (SPORTSBOOK)

commitment. “My man could be a monk in the mountains of China in 10 years,” says Logan. “I have no idea what Jake Paul will be doing.”

Asked again whether he has the patience for what’s ahead, Paul shrugs. He points to the progress he has made with his union, formally titled the United Fighters Association. He says he has spoken to a handful of notable fighters who have expressed interest in joining. Anderson Silva, whom Paul defeated in a boxing match last year, is on board. He says he has commitments from five others, too. “The biggest challenge is all the fighters are really difficult to work with,” says Paul. “They’re very selfish. They think it’s too good to be true. A lot of the UFC fighters are scared to go against the regime. They think that if their name’s attached to something, that they’re going to get cut or shelved or lose all their money.

“There’s a ton of interest from boxers. The problem is that you have to start by going up against a corporation. That’s what a union is, going up against a specific entity. In boxing there’s less of that; it’s more scattered. The way to make the dominoes fall is starting with MMA and going against, basically, the UFC. That power and control would trickle into the rest of the combat sports, because the UFC would have to play by a certain set of rules. Then we would bring that over to boxing.”

For now, Paul says, he wants to lead by example. He wants fighters to have more freedom, pointing to how his pay-per-views have been distributed by Showtime, ESPN and DAZN. “These fighters get stuck,” he says. When they reach a certain level, Paul says, they should use that *influence*—there’s that word again—to boost the next generation, as he has with Serrano. “Floyd’s doing it now with Gervonta,” says Paul. “But imagine if Gervonta was the co-main event during the height of Floyd’s career? Even Gervonta right now, I know he has his company, but he should have a fighter underneath him while he’s becoming the biggest star in the sport.”

There’s a frustration in Paul’s voice. His passion for boxing is real. So too is his desire to grow it, or at least that’s how it feels. Before the press conference, Paul catches himself staring up at a jumbotron with his image on the screen. Years earlier, he had traveled to Dallas for a meet-and-greet. Around 500 fans showed up that day. More than 18,000 are expected to pack the building for his fight with Diaz. “I love the sport,” says Paul. “It’s changed my life. It saved my life. And it can be so much better.”

Moments later, an official waves Paul over to the dais.

“O.K.,” says Paul. “Now let’s go f--- this guy up.” □

EILEEN GU

San Francisco native Gu, 19, chose to ski for China at the 2022 Beijing Olympics to honor her mother, Yan. Now she is the third-highest-paid female athlete in the world, a social media giant and an ambassador for Salt Lake City’s bid for the ’30 Games. —M.R.

RAYSSA LEAL

Videos of the Brazilian-born Leal skating in a tutu at age 7 went viral. Now 15, Leal has maximized her early fame. She won an Olympic silver in street skateboarding in Tokyo and has 6.4 million Instagram followers, surpassing stars like Naomi Osaka. *—Jamie Lisanti*

sportsbooks. Five years ago the Supreme Court overturned the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA), opening the door to legalized sports gambling in the U.S. Since then, tens of millions of fans have wagered more than $180 billion, not just on games and point spreads, but on individual free throws, at bats and putts. More states now permit sports gambling than ban it. And thanks to mobile technology, it’s no more difficult (or remarkable) to place a wager than it is to order an Uber or an item on Amazon. (Full disclosure: Sports Illustrated is among the many media companies that now partner with sportsbooks.) There are, of course, adjacent perils. Which is why leagues and legislators alike fought legalized sports betting for decades, before their dramatic about-face. The integrity of competition can be undercut by fixing and tanking. Gamblers can grow addicted. Debts can go unpaid. Still, sports gambling is here to stay. And we’re in the early innings. As DraftKings CEO Jason Robins puts it: “While the milestones of legalized sports betting are remarkable, this industry is excitingly still far from being fully realized.” —L.J.W.

SIMON BRUTY (GU); TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES (LEAL)

NETFLIX DOC MAKERS

✦ **THE DOCUMENTARY** series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* premiered on Netflix in 2019 and immediately became a sensation. U.S. fans who might not have known their DRS from their MPG were captivated by drivers like Max Verstappen *(right)*. It wasn't just a boon for Netflix. F1's popularity soared, and now other niche outfits (the Tour de France, tennis, golf) are hoping their doc deals with the streamer will lead to similar bumps in visibility. You paying attention, curling powers that be? —M.B.

JAY MARINE

✦ **HE'S FAR** from a household name, but Amazon's global head of sports is a force, as the balance of power in sports media swings from linear to streaming networks. Marine—along with VP of global sports video Marie Donoghue—oversaw the launch of *Thursday Night Football* on the service last year; flex scheduling and a Black Friday game will elevate the *TNF* profile further this year. Amazon also has Premier League and WNBA rights. Expect Marine to be front and center when NBA rights are up for grabs in 2025. —S.C.

THE OTHER STREAMERS

✦ **AMAZON WAS** the trailblazer, but plenty of streaming services have joined the live sports gold rush. Last December, YouTube TV agreed to pay $2 billion a year for the NFL's Sunday Ticket package. Apple TV+ has deals to air live MLB and MLS games; Peacock has exclusive Sunday morning MLB games; Max has USMNT and USWNT soccer matches. As the streaming landscape grows more competitive, one thing from the linear network heyday holds true: Live sports are still a massive audience attractor. —S.C.

SOCIAL MEDIA STARS

As technology and the thirst for content continue to collide, a new wave is **DISRUPTING THE DIGITAL WORLD.** *These 10 sports creators have virality in their veins —and should be on your must-follow list*

PAT MCAFEE

DOCKERY

Ex–Oregon State wide receiver Rahmel Dockery has the self-proclaimed "best hands on TikTok"—plus four million followers.

JENNA BANDY

A former D-II basketball player, Bandy has sports skills and trick shot videos that have earned her 1.3 million TikTok followers.

JOMBOY

Jimmy O'Brien's hilarious videos breaking down MLB moments turned him into a media personality and launched Jomboy Media.

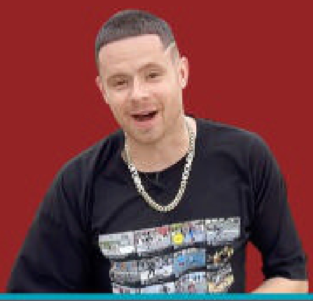
ISHOWSPEED

Darren Watkins Jr.'s humor and electric personality while streaming games have helped him gain 17.3 million YouTube subscribers.

KEITH LEE

The ex-MMA fighter built up 13.1 million TikTok followers with his food reviews; Lee even inspired Chipotle to add a new item.

THE PROFESSOR



A streetball legend since 2009, Grayson Boucher has amassed 7.5 million YouTube subscribers, plus 6.3 million on TikTok.

SNAPPY GILMORE

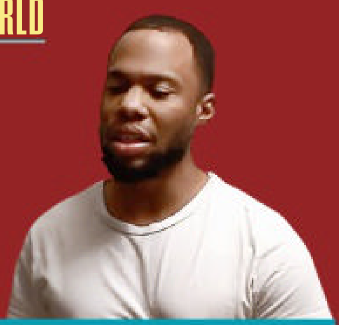
Golf, Art & Hip Hop

A clip of his wild one-arm golf swing went viral in 2021. It's no wonder that Eliezer Paul-Gindiri now has 2.6 million TikTok followers.

DEESTROYING

Donald De La Haye Jr. lost his NCAA eligibility over his YouTube channel but now has 5.2 million subscribers to his football skills videos.

REAL DREAMS CHANGE THE WORLD



Mark Phillips's comedic skits are beloved by NBA stars and fans, with over seven million followers on Instagram and YouTube.

TERRENCE ROSS

The 32-year-old Suns guard is also a massive *NBA2K* streamer on Twitch and has nearly 400,000 followers on TikTok.

✦ **THERE ISN'T** a hotter sports media star today than this 36-year-old. The former NFL punter's bread and butter is his daily YouTube offering, *The Pat McAfee Show*, which will move to ESPN in the fall and has built a massive following thanks to his authenticity and interviews. Case in point: Aaron Rodgers's appearance after his darkness retreat had more than 500,000 concurrent viewers. —*Jimmy Traina*

PETER FOX/GETTY IMAGES (VERSTAPPEN); MANNY CARABEL/GETTY IMAGES FOR AMAZON (MARINE); JOE CAMPOREALE/USA TODAY SPORTS (MCAFEE); COURTESY OF DOCKERY (DOCKERY); COURTESY OF THE PROFESSOR (THE PROFESSOR); ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (BANDY); MICHAEL OWENS/GETTY IMAGES (GILMORE); COURTESY OF JOMBOY (JOMBOY); MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES FOR DICK CLARK PRODUCTIONS (DEESTROYING); ZAC GOODWIN/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (ISHOWSPEED); COURTESY OF REAL DREAMS CHANGE THE WORLD (REAL DREAMS CHANGE THE WORLD); COURTESY OF KEITH LEE (LEE); KATE FRESE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (ROSS)

Athletes
Influencers
Executives
Icons & Leaders
Dealmakers

THE POWER LIST

EXECUTIVES

ROGER GOODELL

✦ **IN MAY,** Goodell arrived in Minneapolis with the owners of the 32 NFL franchises and two proposed rule changes on his spring league meetings agenda: flex scheduling for Thursday night games, a measure rife with questions centering on what's best for both fans and players, and a kickoff fair catch rule that would inch one of the sport's signature plays closer to extinction and was uniformly opposed by special teams players and coaches.

Both items had been tabled by NFL owners in March, mostly because at the time the proposals lacked the support to go through. The former was voted down by the league's old guard, the Bears, Packers, Lions, Giants, Steelers and Bengals among them. The latter was soundly defeated, falling far short of 24 votes needed for adoption.

On the first day of spring meetings, Goodell, in his 17th year as commissioner, got the *Thursday Night Football* flex passed and persuaded eight owners to flip on the kickoff rule. It, too, was approved, on Day 2.

Whether either will have a material effect on the 2023 season remains to be seen. But the journey from opposition to approval for these measures is a telling glimpse into the extent of Goodell's power and leadership—amd what he considers his main charge, namely to keep the NFL growing into an ever-larger money-making Goliath. The *TNF* rule will help add value for a streaming partner, which will be important to the league's next set of broadcast negotiations. The kickoff rule will protect owners—at whose pleasure Goodell serves, it must always be remembered—against concussion liability.

A wise man once told me that to cover Goodell's NFL, all you have to do is follow the money. And for all his faults—critics point to inconsistencies in his decisions around discipline for franchises and individual players, and he has acknowledged that the league could have been more sensitive in its handling of social justice protests by players—Goodell, 64, can create more ways to make more money than anyone in sports. Which is why his bosses, the owners, are just fine with the job he's done. Goodell's current five-year contract, worth up to $200 million, will expire in March 2024. It's no surprise that as teams were wrapping offseason OTAs and preparing for training camp, this report began to surface: The owners and the commissioner are close to agreeing on a contract extension that will keep him on the job until '27. The Goodell era, and his influence on the sports landscape, is far from over. —*Albert Breer*

GREG SANKEY

The SEC, winners of 13 of the past 17 national football titles, is a money-making beast that lords over college sports. As leader of the nation's richest football conference, Sankey, 58, likely has more sway than anyone over the future of the college game. He's known as well read and as a deep thinker who's patient in his decision-making. Now he must juggle the needs of revenue-generating football powers with nonrevenue Olympic sports that are still important to the college model. —*Ross Dellenger*

MARVIN GENTRY/USA TODAY SPORTS (SANKEY); KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR YOUTUBE (GOODELL)

THE OTHER COMMISHES

✦ **IT'S THE** NFL and everyone else in terms of economic might and cultural clout, but the other members of the Big Four of men's North American sports are behemoths in their own rights. In 2022, MLB raked in a record $10.8 billion in revenue, the NBA topped $10 billion for the first time and the NHL reached a record $5.3 billion. Combine the revenues of the three leagues—with their increasingly globalized footprints—and you'd have an economy that ranks around 100th in the world in GDP.

This growth is driven by leaders who have put unmistakable stamps on their sports. Rob Manfred, 64, presides over an era of evolution in MLB, having spurred several rule changes this year to improve the sport. Next up: reshaping how games are delivered to fans as the regional network model collapses and streaming grows.

In his nine years as NBA boss, Adam Silver, 61, has negotiated two CBAs and steered the league through several thorny crises. Next year he'll close on a new broadcast deal that could be worth $75 billion. Two years ago Gary Bettman, now 71, negotiated new broadcast deals for the NHL, doubling what the league had been getting from national TV partners. In his 31st year atop the NHL, he's the longest-serving commissioner ever in the Big Four. Booing him when he hands out the Stanley Cup is an annual tradition, but his impact is undeniable. —S.C.

CHARLIE BAKER

✦ **THE FORMER** governor of Massachusetts, Baker, 66, replaced Mark Emmert in March as the new leader of the ever-evolving NCAA, with a primary goal of pushing Congress to pass college athlete legislation. A Republican with over a 70% approval rating in a Democratic state, Baker is known as a pragmatic thinker who can work with both sides in negotiations on the Hill. His political clout will steer the NCAA during a tumultuous time in college sports, where its role has never been more in question. —R.D.

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JIMMY PITARO

✦ **IT MAY BE** somewhat of a rebuilding era for ESPN, with rights fees up, subscribers down and a new business model aimed at going direct to the consumer rather than relying on the fraying cable bundle. But for all the flux and roster turnover, ESPN remains a media, sports and entertainment giant. And by extension, the figure in charge still wields great power. Currently, that's chairman Pitaro, a straight-talking New Yorker whose recent wins include repairing the network's relationship with the NFL—ESPN and ABC are now in the Super Bowl rotation—and signing on Peyton and Eli Manning for the alternative ManningCast during *Monday Night Football*. He's also nourished the growth of paid subscription service ESPN+ and will soon build the network's share of NBA rights. And with 72-year-old Bob Iger set to retire again after returning last November, Pitaro, 53, sits on the short list of execs to possibly succeed the Disney CEO. —L.J.W.

DANA WHITE

✦ **SINCE BECOMING** UFC president in 2001, White has legitimized mixed martial arts, making fights sufficiently mainstream to air on ESPN and ultimately leading to WME's purchase of the promotion for $4 billion in '16. This would have been one of the great sports business success stories—except the round continued. In April, WME merged UFC with WWE to form a $21.4 billion public company—more than half of the UFC's value. Through it all, White, 53, has been the backbone. He polarizes. He pontificates. His favorite words are expletives. He is also one of the most influential and longest-serving sports executives of our time. —L.J.W.

MICHELE KANG

UNPROFESSIONALISM, improper investment and front office negligence have often plagued the National Women's Soccer League since its launch in 2012. But that began to change with the Washington Spirit owner. The CEO of Cognosante, a health care technology company, Kang, 64, has not only helped shift the demographics of NWSL ownership, but also elevated

THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES (PITARO); SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES (WHITE)

GIANNI INFANTINO

✦ **THE FIFA PRESIDENT** may not be soccer's most popular figure, but there is no doubt he's the most powerful. Infantino, 53, led the push to expand the men's World Cup (from 32 teams to 48 in 2026) and the women's, from 24 to 32 teams this summer. His critics point to his defense of Qatar over human rights issues, his previous link to Vladimir Putin and expansion goals that may put player health at risk. His supporters herald FIFA's stability, its $4 billion reserve and $11 billion revenue forecast through '26. He could remain in power through '31. That's a long time to dictate the direction of the world's most lucrative sport. —A.G.

its professional standard. Now she has her sights on something even more ambitious. In the spring she bought a majority stake in Olympique Lyonnais Féminin with the intention of creating an international women's soccer organization. The women-owned, multiclub firm will be the first of its kind, advancing how the sport is furnished globally. —C.B.

YOUSSEF LOULIDI/FANTASISTA/GETTY IMAGES (INFANTINO); BRAD SMITH/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (KANG); TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES (CONE); KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (KROENKE); SHAREIF ZIYADAT/GETTY IMAGES FOR THIS IS DOPE (TREMAGLIO); COURTESY OF EA SPORTS (WEBER)

CINDY PARLOW CONE

Appointed U.S. Soccer president in 2020, Cone, 45, has a powerful voice as a former player and grasp of the game's pay structure that were crucial in the USWNT's '22 equal pay feat—an outcome that the two previous leaders never attained. —J.L.

STAN KROENKE

In 2012 the Missouri-born billionaire was the only figure anchored in four major leagues. More than a decade later, Kroenke, 75, has only added clout and prestige—especially as his three U.S. teams (Rams, Nuggets and Avalanche) have each won titles since '21. —L.J.W.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO

✦ **IN JANUARY 2022**, Tremaglio took over as executive director of the National Basketball Players Association, succeeding Michele Roberts. Her first task: Negotiate a new, multibillion-dollar CBA. That April the union closed on a deal that will ensure labor peace until '29. A former Deloitte exec, Tremaglio, 53, was recruited for her business background. Union president CJ McCollum told *The Washington Post* that she puts players in a position "to think more like CEOs." In other words: Make more money. With gambling and technology creating more potential revenue streams, she is charged with finding them. —C.M.

CAM WEBER

✦ **SERVING AS** EA Sports executive VP and general manager since 2018, Weber has championed the representation of women's sports across the company's portfolio of games. In July '22, Chelsea forward Sam Kerr became the first woman to be featured on a *FIFA* global cover (alongside Kylian Mbappé of PSG, who stood alone on the '21 and '22 editions). Earlier this year EA Sports announced a partnership with the NWSL to bring all 12 teams to the game, while a new technology is helping make women's players move more authentically. Under Weber, EA Sports games are played by more than 200 million worldwide. —J.L.

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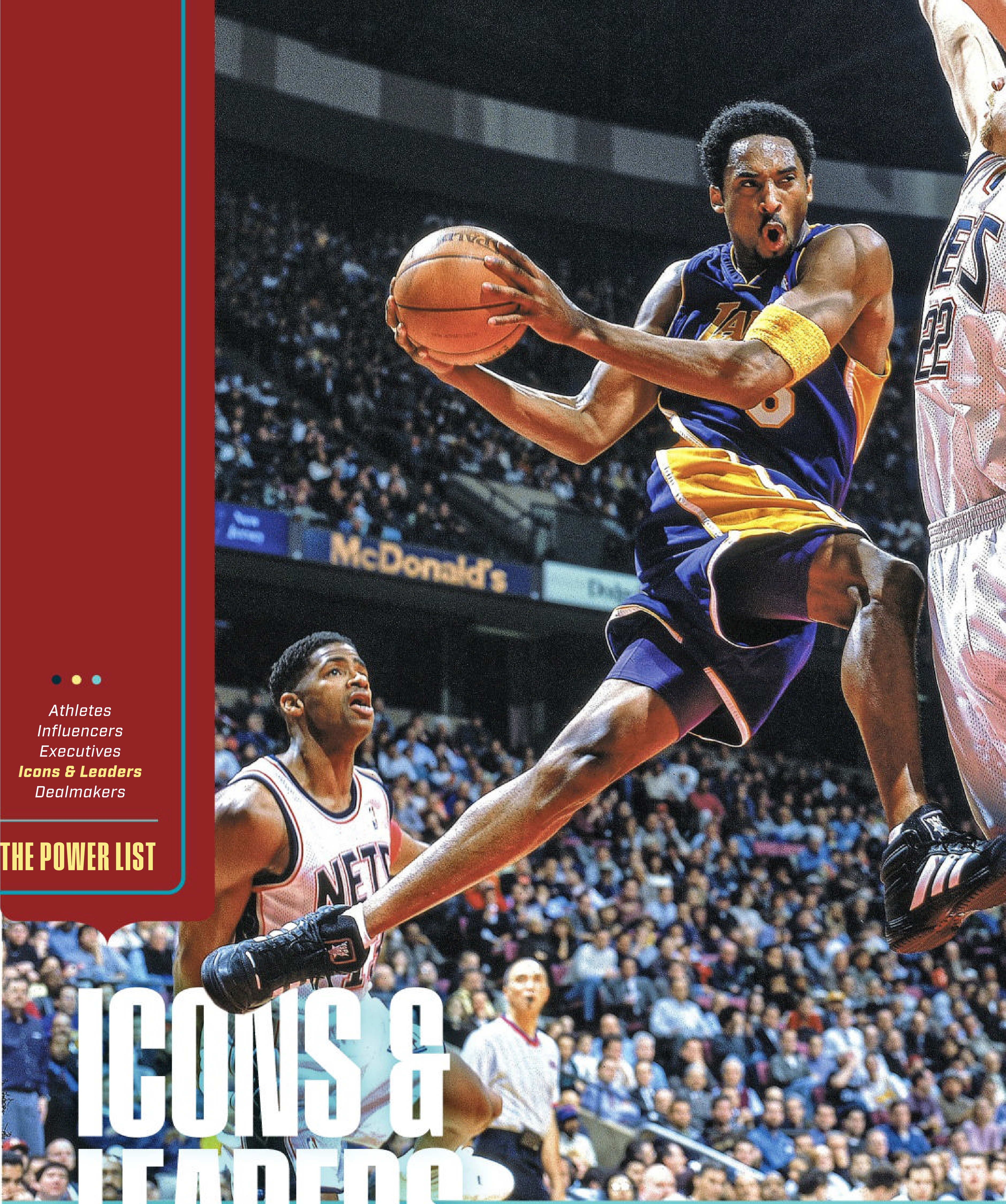
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ICONS & LEADERS

They no longer play the game—and longer with us—but still their **LEGACIES**

in the case of the Mamba, are no
LOOM LARGE *and inspire new generations*

BY
Greg Bishop
PHOTOGRAPH BY
Manny Millan

KOBE BRYANT

SKYLAR DIGGINS-SMITH met him—her primary mentor/inspiration/idol/most improbable friend—at a commercial shoot. They filmed the spot in 2013, after her star turn at Notre Dame and before she became a WNBA mainstay.

Nike sponsored her, same as him, which is how both arrived in the same place, on the same set. Eventually, she mustered the courage to approach him, this basketball deity, beloved throughout the world. She asked for a photo, starstruck; her favorite picture, even now. And yet, while her hero understood what he meant to other people, he didn't act like he knew that his presence filled hearts and weakened knees.

"He was *Kobe* and he was just Kobe, if that makes sense," she says. "He didn't try to be anybody else. He was real, genuine. Him."

That Diggins-Smith refers to Kobe Bryant the same as the rest of the world, by his first name, no additional identifiers necessary, speaks to his impact, its depth. She'll never forget that day. Nor will she forget Jan. 26, 2020, a Sunday, the worst day, when Bryant; his 13-year-old daughter, Gianna; and seven others died in a helicopter crash. It took Diggins-Smith years to understand, let alone explain, the significance.

Bryant wasn't just a five-time NBA champion,

MADE MERION

Diggins-Smith honored Bryant by wearing his high school jersey—and then knocking down 12 of 19 shots in a win.

Hall of Famer and all-time great; Kobe spread basketball. But he also, specifically, spread women's basketball. He called Breanna Stewart after she ruptured her Achilles tendon to offer guidance on an injury he understood too well. He wore WNBA gear, proudly and in public. He founded the Mamba Sports Academy, which provided access to sports for girls and other children. "In our game, no one had more impact," Diggins-Smith says. Each female player saw in him the title of his book, *The Mamba Mentality*. Each also saw that mentality in themselves.

They weren't alone. Kobe wrote TV and commercial scripts. Kobe produced documentaries. Kobe read *Harry Potter*. Kobe befriended regular folks, writers, directors, celebrities. Kobe woke up early, tried new things, excelled at everything. Kobe challenged himself, in basketball and outside it, impacting people in numerous industries, various countries and different economic stratospheres along the way. His death, Diggins-Smith says, forced everyone influenced by him to reach deeper and push for more, and Diggins-Smith believes that stems from the rare duality baked into Kobe, part of his genetic code. He was the most savage competitor in sports at least since Michael Jordan retired. But he was also the most relatable celebrity alive.

She sighs over the phone, perhaps to acknowledge that she would gladly exchange every ounce of impact for Kobe, in the flesh. This is the next-best alternative: "Kobe is everywhere, you know, and that means something."

* * *

BEFORE THE 2018 football season, Kobe popped by the Alabama campus for a visit. This was August, only months removed from The Benching—when Nick Saban swapped Jalen Hurts for Tua Tagovailoa at halftime of the national championship game. Tagovailoa would remain the starter. Kobe's message was intended to resonate with both, with all.

Hurts sat in the audience, up front, as Bryant addressed the Crimson Tide. Everyone always asked him for his secrets, Bryant noted. There really wasn't a secret at all. Just *editing*. "I learned at an early age, I have to edit my life," he said. "If there's s--- that's bad for me, if there are people that are bad for me, I have to edit . . . them . . . out of . . . my life."

The message resonated, with Hurts especially. He had crafted a plan for the rest of his career—serve as an elite backup if he never regained the starting role; make the most of any spot duty; graduate, in part to open up transfer options; excel; NFL; world domination. Kobe's message provided one final push. Hurts stuck to his plan. When Tua hurt both ankles in the SEC championship game against Georgia, Hurts came in and sparked a comeback. Same field as the benching. Same opponent. An edited life . . . won.

Hurts transferred to Oklahoma, made the NFL, continued editing and, amid an MVP campaign last season, pushed Philadelphia to the Super Bowl. His sports performance director in Philly, Ted Rath, had visited Alabama's campus in 2020. He learned about the speech back then

FROM LEFT: KATE FRESE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

MICHAEL JORDAN

✦ **TWO DECADES** after his last NBA game, Jordan, 60, remains one of sport's most recognizable—and successful—figures. His Jordan Brand dominates and huddled with Hurts as Super Bowl LVII approached. Both decided they would use it.

On Day 1 of Super Bowl week, Rath stood before the team inside their temporary weight room in Arizona. In the hopes of tying everything together—the goal ahead, how Hurts approached recovering from far more shoulder pain than the public knew—Rath hit play on his laptop. Kobe's speech boomed across the room.

Rath found Hurts afterward. Hadn't that been the point of their last month together? Not listening to agents, relatives nor friends. Missing two games he desperately wanted to play in. Looking deeply inward. Focusing on recovery, nothing else. Editing his story and, by extension, the story of the Eagles' season.

"I see a lot of Kobe in Jalen," Rath says. The quarterback led his fired-up team out of the weight room on that day in Arizona, everyone floating onto the practice field. Six nights remained before the Super Bowl. The Eagles, players say, had their best practice of the season.

Hurts is still editing, studying Bryant's evolution as a leader. Rath looks at Hurts and sees Kobe. How many other trainers could look at their superstar and *say exactly the same thing*?

• • •

DIGGINS-SMITH SUBSCRIBES to a theory that the greatest of the greats, like Kobe, have their impacts widen after death. She sees it at basketball courts across the country, in bolstered WNBA resources and interest, in so many children named Kobe or Koby or Ko-B.

Like Coby Bryant. Before helping to lift Cincinnati into the upper echelon of college football and before the Seahawks made him a prominent part of their defensive overhaul, he was a baby whose family loved the NBA. Sure, Ronnie Bryant lived in Cleveland. But it wasn't LeBron James who most inspired him. It was Kobe. So when it came time to name his youngest son, Ronnie decided to pay homage to his favorite player. (There is a mild family dispute. Coby says his older brother, Christian, claims he came up with the name. At age 7! "Older brothers

> "KOBE IS EVERYWHERE, YOU KNOW," SAYS LONGTIME WNBA STAR DIGGINS-SMITH, "AND THAT MEANS SOMETHING."

KOHJIRO KINNO (FELIX); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (JORDAN)

ALLYSON FELIX

✦ **AFTER 19 YEARS** and 11 medals (seven gold) at five straight Olympics, track and field's most decorated woman retired at age 36 in July 2022. But one can argue that Felix's true legacy doesn't have anything to do with spikes or speed. She says she found her "why" for competing once she was pregnant with her daughter, Camryn, who was born two months early via emergency C-section after Felix developed severe preeclampsia. Since then, Felix has harnessed her voice to tirelessly fight for improved maternal health standards for all. —J.L.

sneaker culture, and his iconic Jumpman logo can be seen on jerseys everywhere—including Paris Saint-Germain. The first former NBA player to own a team and the league's only Black majority owner, he recently sold his stake in the Hornets for $3 billion—and he still controls a NASCAR team. —M.B.

SERENA WILLIAMS

✦ **ONCE ECLIPSED** by other players—first Maria Sharapova, then Naomi Osaka—in off-court income, Williams, 41, has turned the tables. While still playing she launched Serena Ventures, which invests more than 75% of its funds in women- and minority-owned companies. She still profits from endorsements, but also takes equity stakes in early-stage brands in exchange for cash. Thus, the $95 million she made will be dwarfed by her post-tennis earnings. Take that, Sharapova. —L.J.W.

BILLIE JEAN KING

✦ **THIS SUMMER** marks 50 years since the 1973 U.S. Open became the first sporting event in history to offer equal prize money for the men's and women's winners, a momentous step forward that was set off by King's emphatic call for action a year earlier. A half century later, King, 79, is still firmly rooted in the fight for equality. She was a vital resource and advocate for the USWNT during their pay equity fight, and her Women's Sports Foundation is spearheading the growth of women's sports today. —J.L.

DWYANE WADE & GABRIELLE UNION

✦ **DURING AN** acceptance speech at the 2023 NAACP Image Awards in February, Union, 50, stood next to her husband and retired NBA star, Wade, 41, and posed a question to the crowd: "Will we fight for some, or will we fight for all of our people?" The duo—whose 16-year-old daughter, Zaya, came out as transgender in '20—have been at the forefront of "a new era of activism," advocating for acceptance and the protection of LGBTQ rights, particularly for the Black trans community. —J.L.

always want to take credit," Coby says with a laugh.) Regardless, the originator changed the spelling on purpose, so that Coby could shape his own legacy in Kobe's image.

What's in a name? A lot, Coby Bryant learned. Try playing basketball, even in youth leagues, when your name is Coby Bryant. Try watching clips of the NBA superstar you're named after when you're 7, to understand the standard you must meet. Try buying school lunch and having a clerk ask for your ID, because they don't believe that name is *your* name.

Eventually the significance seeped into young Coby's soul. He embraced the Mamba Mentality and took that approach into football. As a senior, he won the Jim Thorpe Award. Before Cincinnati competed in the kind of game it never reached—a CFP semifinal against Alabama—Coby switched his jersey number from 7 to 8. More homage.

When he was drafted in the fourth round in 2022 by Seattle, Coby immediately took 8. Then he went all Kobe, injecting the soul of the athlete he's named after into a defense (and team) that far exceeded expectations. Coby says that Kobe came up all the time. Like when the defensive backs discussed the full nature of their lives (Coby, for instance, played baseball growing up, and focused on his degree in interdisciplinary studies while in college). Or when they talked about their futures (Coby wants to enter broadcasting—like Kobe, becoming a member of the media). Or whenever someone pointed out the expectations for the Seahawks (low) and how they might overcome them (work). "It's no pressure," Coby says. "It's a privilege."

Hence his rookie season: six starts; a shift inside, to nickel corner; gradual improvement; and four forced fumbles, tied for third in the NFL. All these seamless adjustments started in the same place, with the same person. Or people. Coby. And Kobe.

"I try to carry that mentality," Coby says. "That's the best way to represent."

● ● ●

DIGGINS-SMITH KNEW the perfect way to honor Kobe. Hence the jersey—his No. 33 from Lower Merion High—she wore to a game in July 2022. But she also knew, "You gotta be careful," when wearing one of Kobe's jerseys to the office, especially when that office is a basketball court. Not to worry. Playing for the Mercury, she dropped 35 points.

"You put that jersey on, and you feel like you're

ERICK W. RASCO [WILLIAMS, KING]; CINDY ORD/MG23/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE MET MUSEUM/VOGUE] [WADE, UNION]

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in *Space Jam*," she says. "Everything comes to life. It's like, *O.K., I got that power. Whoever got me, got problems.*"

Even on that day, memorable as it was, she understood something else, something even more powerful. Simply honoring Kobe on the basketball court wasn't nearly enough. Kobe's influence made her a better mother. A better teammate. A more empathetic person. A more well-rounded one.

Months passed. Then years. She watched his Hall of Fame induction in May 2021, her television screen yet more proof of how many Kobe impacted. There were young women in the crowd. Old men. Kobe's widow, Vanessa. Basketball luminaries. Movie big shots. Writers, producers, creators. She wished only that Kobe could have seen it, could have spoken.

"He was bigger in person," she says. "Tall, big personality, that presence."

He's even bigger now, in death. Gone too soon. But still filling the sports world, the *world*, with deep purpose. Still Kobe. Still influencing.

Because of Kobe, in part, Diggins-Smith produced a documentary series for Nickelodeon. Because of Kobe, in part, she continued to refine her professional basketball career. Because of Kobe, in part, she pursued more Olympic glory. And because of Kobe, in part, her decision to step away from part of a WNBA season, her 10th, closer to the end than the beginning, was easy.

She had a baby girl, who may play basketball. Kobe taught Diggins-Smith many things, but if he taught her only one thing, it was this: to embrace life, all of it, in search of balance and greatness and passions, plural. "He forced everyone to look deeply inward," she says. "To ask: How can we do our part?"

This is how. By loving basketball and family. And by supporting that baby girl, in whatever she decides to do, as long as a certain mentality is the benchmark, the standard, the soul. ☐

DEION SANDERS

✦ **WHETHER HE** is all hat and no cattle as the new coach at Colorado remains to be seen, but the jolt of interest Sanders, 55, has injected into a previously irrelevant program underscores the power of his personal brand—and his willingness to disrupt the status quo. After his leap from FCS Jackson State to the Pac-12, he rebuilt the 1–11 Buffaloes, adding his quarterback son, Shedeur, and defensive back Travis Hunter, the nation's 2022 No. 1 recruit. Intense curiosity about the Coach Prime Experience has landed the Buffs coveted TV slots for their first three games. *—Pat Forde*

DAWN STALEY

✦ **WHILE HER** playing career was impressive, Staley, 53, has cemented her legacy as a coach. She's transformed South Carolina into a powerhouse and she uses her platform to uplift others. When she won the NCAA title in 2017, for instance, she cut up her piece of the net and shared it with every Division I Black female coach. —E.B.

RON CHENOY/USA TODAY SPORTS (SANDERS); CHRIS KEANE (STALEY)

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DEALMAKERS

NICOLE LYNN

LYNN IS AN influencer of elevating influence. Only 34, she's a lawyer, author, public speaker and, as president of football at Klutch Sports Group, the agent for NFL stars Jalen Hurts, Myles Garrett, Quinnen Williams, Will Anderson Jr. and Bijan Robinson, to name just a few.

Her path from the NFL hinterlands to industry titan took 10 years, a decade that saw Lynn go back to college, intern, scuffle and scrap, change jobs, work for a famous rapper's agency and land an MVP candidate through an Instagram DM. Year after year, she had to work to infiltrate a landscape where the best players went to the same agencies for representation.

Lynn grew up in Tulsa, raised around sports. She pursued cheerleading and rugby and went to Oklahoma to study business management. While on campus, she met her husband, Gabe, a cornerback for the Sooners who played briefly in the NFL. Their friends were mostly athletes.

The stories she heard from them were a picture of mismanagement. Lynn recalls one, from an older football player who was drafted into the NFL but didn't last long. This player was beloved. But he returned to campus having already spent all his NFL earnings. He would struggle for years with his mental health. Lynn heard recently he might be "living on the streets." And, because she is unafraid to tackle problems that lack obvious answers, she looked at a "really terrible, terrible situation" and thought, *I'm gonna be an agent.*

Lynn wanted to teach players financial literacy, so she completed her business degree, became a financial analyst and went to work on Wall Street. But the financial advisers she met trafficked primarily in portfolio management. She wanted to empower clients instead. She created a "rookie school" called Fishers of Men to connect prospects with mentors and teach life skills: how much to tip at restaurants, how to draft professional emails, how to check a credit score. Before this year's draft, where she represented Anderson (third pick) and Robinson (eighth), her prospects met once a week for a few hours.

If you liked the movie *Jerry Maguire*, Lynn's narrative echoes that film's—except hers is not based on a true story. It just is. Hurts evolved from a second-round question mark to MVP candidate in only his third NFL season. Lynn negotiated his extension this spring—after asking on social media whether anyone knew where to find a "Brink's truck"—and netted a critical no-trade clause (the first granted by the Eagles) and $179.3 million in guaranteed cash. The average annual value,

NEZ BALELO

A former infielder in the Mariners' minor league system whose career was cut short due to injury, Balelo joined Creative Artists Agency in 2006 and helped build its baseball division, which he has headed for more than a decade and includes a roster of 30-plus clients. As the agent for Angels star pitcher Shohei Ohtani, the 60-year-old Balelo will negotiate this offseason what figures to be the largest contract in baseball history, if not more than the $503 million deal for Patrick Mahomes that is currently the most lucrative in North American sports. —T.V.

KYODO NEWS/AP

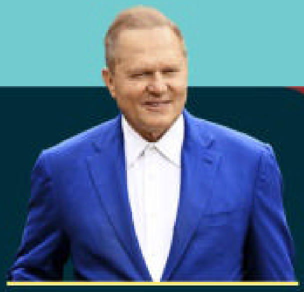
$51 million, briefly marked an NFL record.

But all that isn't why Hurts calls Lynn *(pictured together, below)* a trailblazer. It's because she is a Black woman. It's because she has represented female athletes and analysts for free. Because she chose to empower clients, rather than dictate to them. Because she wrote a book and takes sledgehammers to stereotypes.

Still, for all of her firsts, and there are many—first Black woman to land a top-three pick, first Black female agent with a player in the Super Bowl, arguably the most successful female agent in history, already—Lynn is more than a trailblazer. Those firsts can become more like qualifiers. She requires no qualifications beyond this: *elite agent*. —G.B.

RICH PAUL

✦ **HIS FORTHCOMING** memoir is titled *Lucky Me*, and there are, undeniably, strokes of good fortune in Paul's unlikely story. At 21, he met 17-year-old LeBron James in an Ohio airport. James liked the cut of his jib (or his retro Warren Moon jersey, anyway); the two became friends, then business partners and have been together ever since. But Paul, now 41 *(with girlfriend Adele, above)*, possesses skill in addition to luck. His professionalism and ability to see around cultural corners enabled him to become a premier sports agent and media entrepreneur. His Klutch Sports Group agency may be the biggest behind-the-scenes force in the NBA. —L.J.W.



SCOTT BORAS

✦ **FOR MORE** than 40 years, Boras, 70, has been one of the top power brokers in baseball. Today, his influence is as strong as ever, thanks to his continuing ability to attract elite talent—such as Bryce Harper and pitchers Gerrit Cole and Max Scherzer—and his powerful voice with the MLB Players Association. In just two months last winter, he secured $1.09 billion in contracts for 12 players, including Padres shortstop Xander Bogaerts, Twins shortstop Carlos Correa and Yankees ace Carlos Rodón. —T.V.

G FIUME/GETTY IMAGES (BORAS); COURTESY OF KLUTCH SPORTS GROUP (LYNN); NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (PAUL)

NASSER AL-KHELAÏFI

✦ **THE SON** of a pearl fisherman in Qatar, Al-Khelaïfi, 49, did not grow up around wealth. But in his 30s, he became chairman of Qatar Sports Investment, an arm of the national sovereign wealth fund, then head of beIN, the Qatar-based sports network. As president and CEO of Paris St.-Germain, Al-Khelaïfi reset the transfer market by signing the likes of Kylian Mbappé, Lionel Messi and Neymar. Al-Khelaïfi's power—and wealth—keeps growing; he's purportedly worth $8 billion. —L.J.W.

ARCTOS SPORTS PARTNERS

✦ **YOU DON'T** have to be Jerry Jones or Steve Ballmer to realize value from sports ownership. There are minority owners as well, whose investment appreciates with each new sale and media rights deal. Few know this better than Arctos Sports Partners, a Dallas-based private equity ship led by Doc O'Connor and Ian Charles *(right)* that has taken minority stakes in more than a dozen pro teams, including the Dodgers, Cubs, Lightning and Warriors. This spring, Arctos reported roughly $6.7 billion in sports assets, a spike of 69% from 2022. —L.J.W.

CORY BOOKER

✦ **A DEMOCRATIC** senator from New Jersey and a former Stanford tight end, Booker, 54, has been at the forefront of the athlete compensation debate on Capitol Hill. Some see him as a thorn in the NCAA's side, fighting for radical changes to college athletics. He supports schools sharing revenue with athletes and opposes legislative provisions that assist the NCAA, such as antitrust protection. He personifies a movement that is chaotic and sometimes messy, working to reshape the NCAA as we know it. —R.D.

SAUDI PUBLIC INVESTMENT FUND

✦ **SAUDI ARABIA** may never have won Olympic gold, but it does have an abundance of another commodity: oil. And that oil money has transformed this Middle East kingdom into an ascending, if unlikely, power in global sports. The Saudi Public Investment Fund, among the world's largest, controls Al-Nassr, the club that recently signed Cristiano Ronaldo to a $200 million a year contract—roughly the annual playing wages of LeBron James, Steph Curry, Aaron Judge and Patrick Mahomes combined. Then there is LIV Golf, the breakaway tour that will soon merge with the PGA Tour—and maybe remake it with the help of a massive Saudi-backed investment. As no less than Tiger Woods says, Saudi Arabia is "an endless pit of money." The country's minister of sport, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Saud *(above)*, says it's driven by a desire to promote health and wellness. Others, more cynically, cite this as "sportswashing," a country's attempt to launder its image by using games and athletes. In the end it may not matter, especially if Saudi Arabia wins the right to the 2030 World Cup. —L.J.W.

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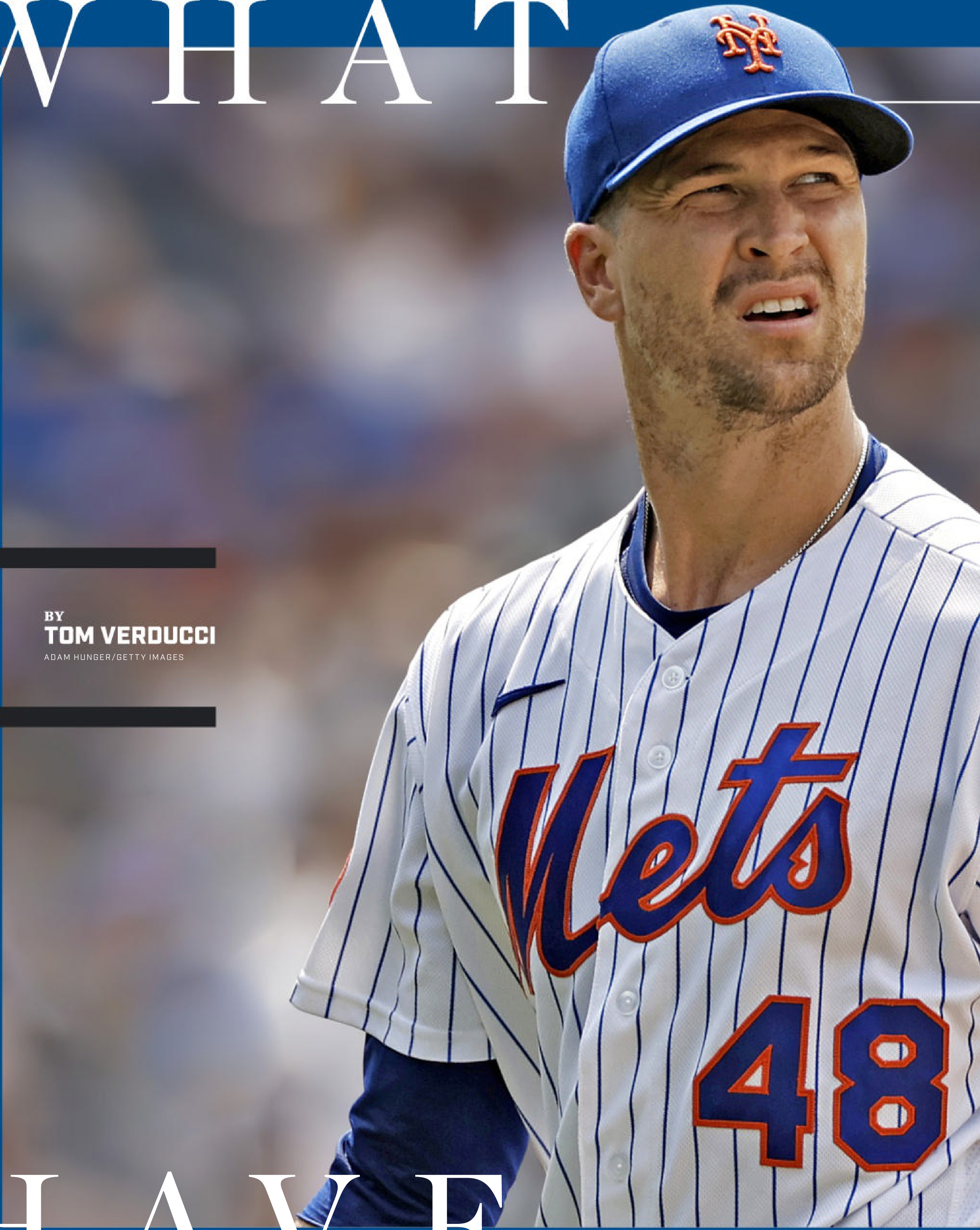

BY
TOM VERDUCCI

ADAM HUNGER/GETTY IMAGES

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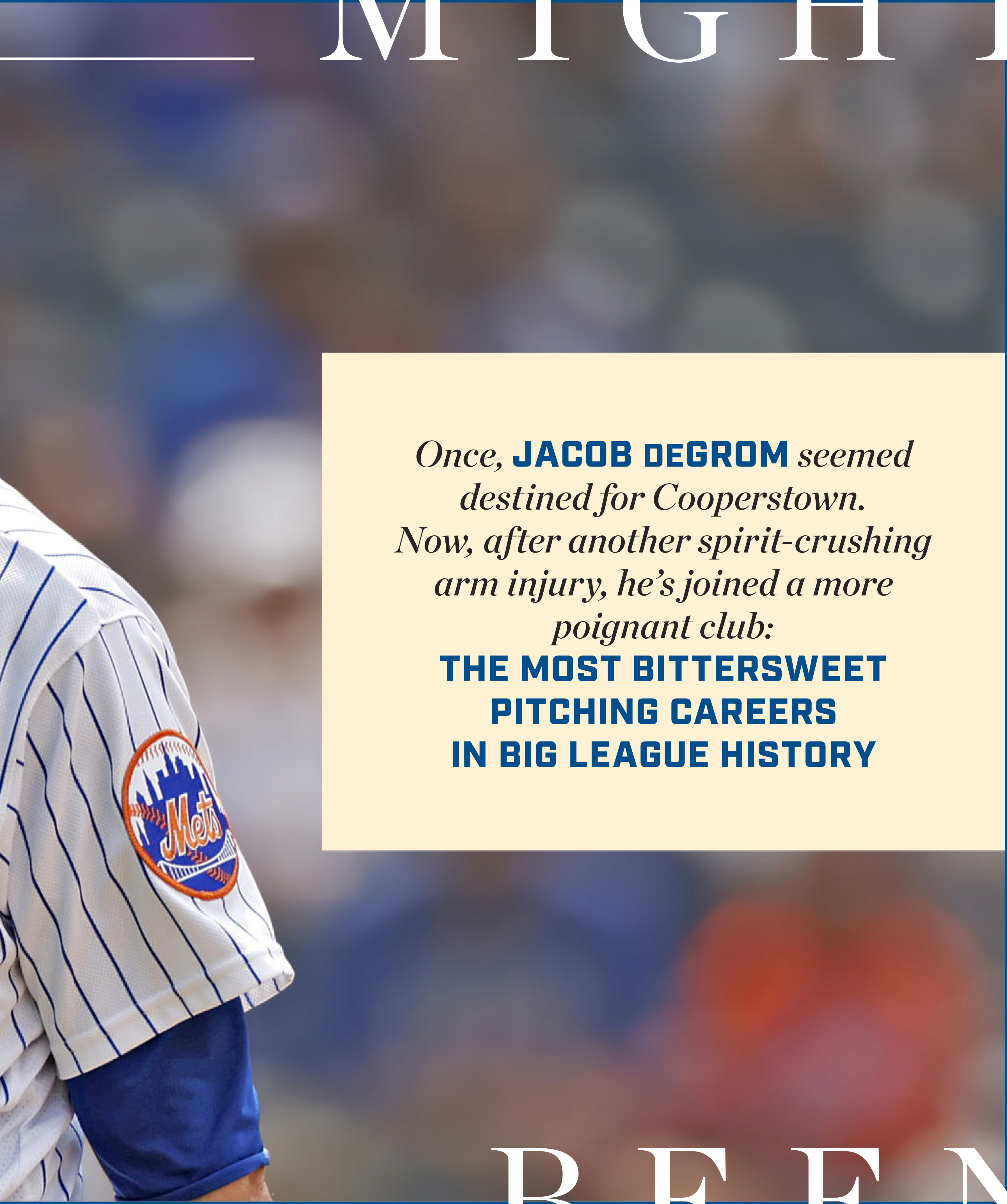


Once, **JACOB DEGROM** *seemed destined for Cooperstown. Now, after another spirit-crushing arm injury, he's joined a more poignant club:*

THE MOST BITTERSWEET PITCHING CAREERS IN BIG LEAGUE HISTORY

BEEN

Nobody threw a baseball harder and with better command than the Rangers' Jacob deGrom.

From his breakthrough season of 2018 through June 1 of this year, deGrom owned the hardest fastball among all MLB starters (97.4-mph average), the hardest slider (92.0 mph), the best strikeout rate among pitchers who threw at least 500 innings (12.3 per nine innings), the best strikeout-to-walk ratio (7.03) and the lowest batting average allowed (.187).

It was pitching elevated to its highest form. With power and command never before seen, deGrom pushed right up against the physical limits of the human body—and eventually through them. On June 6 it was announced that the righthander needed Tommy John surgery, the second time in his career he'll undergo the procedure and the latest in a series of physical breakdowns for him. His brilliant career is on hold again, if not entirely in doubt.

deGrom turned 35 in June. Second Tommy John surgeries, known as revisions, require longer, slower rehabs. Recent studies show the average time between a revision and return to a major league mound is 20.76 months. Success rate (return to form) is lower for revisions than initial surgeries: between 33% and 78%, as compared to between 80% and 95%. Only 29% of revisions led to pitching more than two seasons in MLB.

In a best-case scenario, deGrom will not pitch again in the majors until the end of next season—and more likely given his age and history, not until 2025.

DENNY MEDLEY/USA TODAY SPORTS

ELBOWED OUT
In his six starts with the Rangers, deGrom was as dominant as ever, with 45 K's and just four walks in 30⅓ innings.

GEORGE RINHART/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Whatever thin chances he had of making the Hall of Fame are all but gone. deGrom has thrown 1,356 1/3 innings. There's only one MLB starting pitcher in the Hall of Fame with fewer than 2,000 innings: Dizzy Dean (1,967 1/3). Dean won 150 games; deGrom has just 84 wins.

It is more likely that deGrom will be remembered as a "what if?" rather than "what was."

The history of pitching is filled with Cooperstown detours, from hard-throwing prospects who flamed out (Rick Ankiel, Steve Dalkowski) and dominant pitchers stopped by injuries (Herb Score, J.R. Richard, Don Gullett, Mark Fidrych) to phenoms who did not age well (Fernando Valenzuela, Dwight Gooden, Hideo Nomo, Kerry Wood, Tim Lincecum) and the tragedy of lives cut short (Darryl Kile, José Fernández). Where does deGrom rank among the greatest pitching careers never fully realized? Everybody has a favorite legend who never reached full potential, but let's look at it analytically. Let's dismiss flashes in the pan and find those who showed greatness over an extended period (we will set the bar at 100 career starts) but did not last long enough to be worthy of the Hall of Fame (fewer than 1,500 innings).

Now let's rank these nearly great pitchers according to ERA+, which shows how much better or worse a pitcher's ERA was than league average. Let's call it the Bittersweet Index—you'll find greatness stopped by injuries, war and . . . emery boards?

In countdown order, here are the 13 most bittersweet pitching careers that stopped short of Cooperstown.

13. BABE RUTH

122 ERA+ (1914–35)

In his fifth full season, Ruth made his last start as a regular in the Red Sox' rotation on July 25, 1919, throwing a complete game in an 8–6 win. The Babe was one of the best pitchers in baseball over a five-year window. From '15 to '19, Ruth ranked sixth in wins (87), seventh in ERA (2.16) and eighth in complete games (104). But he gave up pitching because of the physical toll—and because he was an even better hitter, yielding his mound work midway through '19 to set the new home run record with 29. That offseason Boston sold him to the Yankees. He was well on his way to Cooperstown . . . as a hitter.

12. JOHNNY RIGNEY, *122 ERA+ (1937–42, '46–47)*
Life in 1941 was good for Rigney. He was a fixture in the rotation of his hometown team, the White Sox, and he married Dorothy Comiskey, the daughter of the club owner. But then Pearl Harbor happened, and Rigney enlisted in the Navy in '42. He returned to the White Sox four years later—with a sore arm. He was never the same, making only 18 starts before he was done.

11. JOSH JOHNSON, *124 ERA+ (2005–13)*
The fourth pitcher to undergo three Tommy John surgeries, Johnson made two All-Star teams and won an ERA title with the Marlins in between surgeries No. 1 (2007) and No. 2 ('13). There was no MLB comeback after No. 3 ('15). In '05, the year he reached MLB at age 21, Johnson absorbed a 33% innings jump.

He returned with a 20–11 season in '46 but the next season underwent what were then rare surgeries on his shoulder and elbow to address nerve and circulation problems. He was never the same pitcher.

7. JACK PFIESTER, *127 ERA+ (1903–11)*
A left-handed sidearmer for the Cubs who led the NL in ERA in 1907, Pfiester was known as "Jack the Giant Killer" due to how well he pitched against the Giants. His career fizzled after a dislocated forearm tendon. In the famous Merkle's Boner game of '08, Pfiester threw a complete game despite the injury. He was treated by John "Bonesetter" Reese, a favorite doctor among pitchers then, but never regained his form.

10. MARK PRIOR

124 ERA+ (2002–06)

At age 22 in 2003, Prior went 18–6 with a 2.43 ERA and led the Cubs to within five outs of the pennant. That year Prior exceeded 120 pitches 10 times, including four times more than 130, and averaged 125 over his final nine starts. He started the next year on the injured list with elbow soreness and an Achilles tendon strain, and was never the same.

9. JAKE WEIMER, *125 ERA+ (1903–09)*
"Tornado Jake" pitched five years in the minors before he debuted as a 20-game winner with the Cubs in 1903 at age 29. He won 20 games twice more in the next three years, but the lefty faded quickly.

8. TEX HUGHSON, *125 ERA+ (1941–49)*
Hughson was a dominant pitcher and in the prime of his career (57–29, 2.64) when he entered the military in August 1944.

6. RUSS FORD, *127 ERA+ (1909–15)*
The New York Highlanders righthander dominated by scuffing baseballs with an emery board hidden in his glove. Ford jumped to the Federal League in 1914, but when the emery board pitch was banned in '15, he struggled.

5. STEPHEN STRASBURG, *127 ERA+ (2010–?)*
Two months after leading the Nationals to the 2019 title, Strasburg, then 31 with a 3.17 career ERA, signed a seven-year, $245 million contract.

JOHN BIEVER

Since then, the oft-injured righty has pitched in only eight games, none this year due to what has been reported as severe nerve damage.

4. SPUD CHANDLER, *132 ERA+ (1937–47)*
The Yankees righthander was 29 by the time he broke in. He then lost the bulk of two seasons to the war, as well as many starts due to elbow problems. He finished with a .717 win percentage (109–43), best among pitchers with 100 wins.

3. BRANDON WEBB, *142 ERA+ (2003–09)*
His sinker was truly a wonder to behold. From 2006 to '08, Webb was 56–25 in 101 starts with a 3.13 ERA while finishing first once and second twice in Cy Young Award voting. Then, on Opening Day in '09, he gave up six runs in four innings and would never pitch again. He had shoulder surgery that year and again in '11. In '13 he announced his retirement.

2. SMOKY JOE WOOD

146 ERA+ (1908–15, '17, '19–20)

Wood was the deGrom of his day. Nobody threw harder. But he just could not stay healthy. After starting his career 81–43 with a 1.95 ERA by age 22, Wood sustained a broken thumb, appendicitis and a bad shoulder. He essentially was done by age 25, pitching only seven games after that.

1. JACOB deGROM, *155 ERA+ (2014–?)*
Yes, it's the most bittersweet pitching career ever. deGrom came to his elite velocity late. A converted infielder at Stetson, deGrom arrived in the majors in 2014 with a fastball that averaged 94.2 mph. His velocity climbed virtually every season, hitting an average of 99.2 mph in '21. But that's when his body began to break down. In his last 32 starts, deGrom was 14–6 with a 2.03 ERA and 14.1 strikeouts per nine innings. Trouble was, it took him three seasons to make those 32 starts.

deGrom had more strikeouts in his first 215 games (1,652) than any pitcher. His ERA during that period (2.53) is better than any starter in the Live Ball era except Tom Seaver and Clayton Kershaw. Alas, he seems destined to be remembered with the likes of Smoky Joe and Tornado Jake more than the legends of Cooperstown.

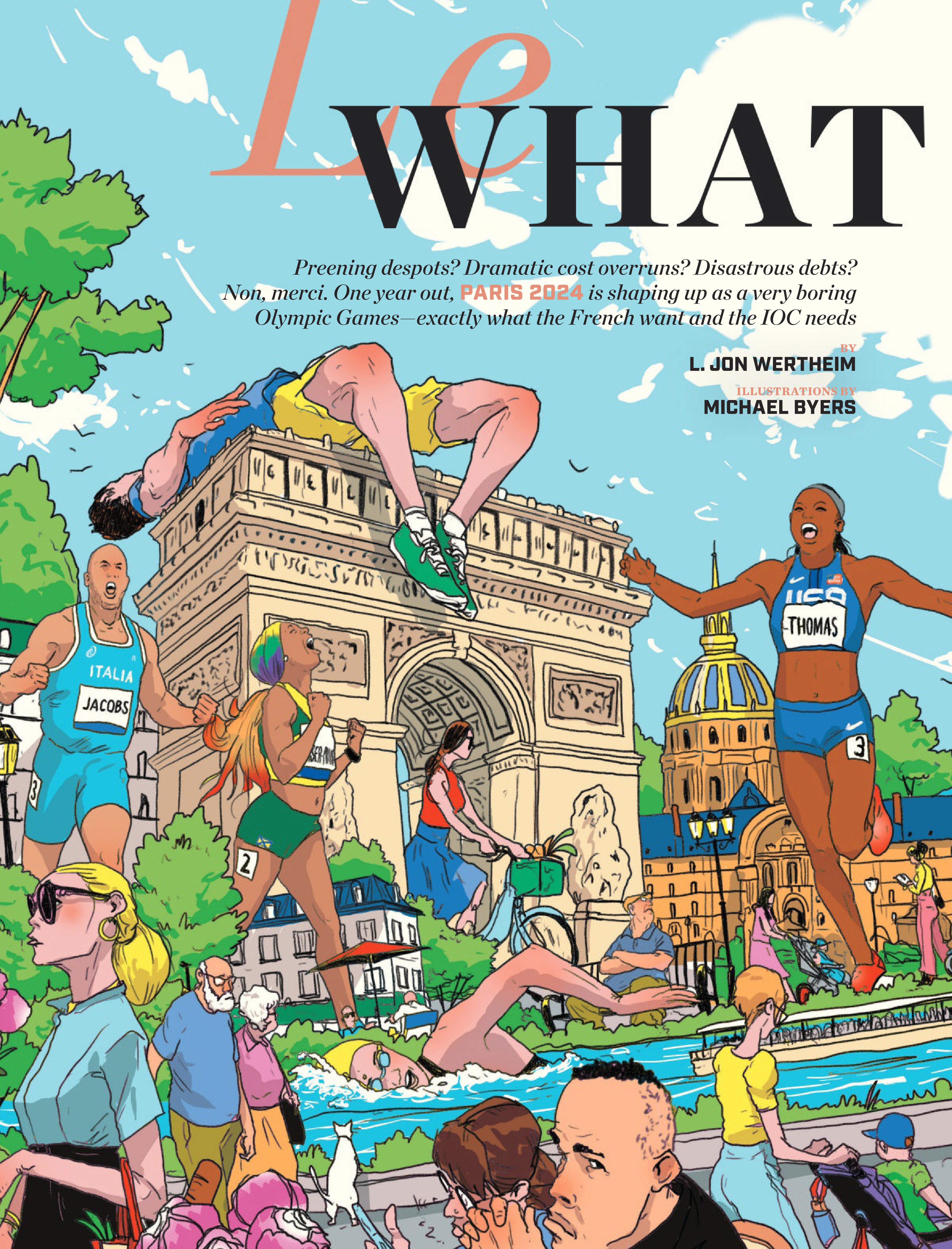
HUM IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

Le WHAT

Preening despots? Dramatic cost overruns? Disastrous debts? Non, merci. One year out, **PARIS 2024** *is shaping up as a very boring Olympic Games—exactly what the French want and the IOC needs*

BY
L. JON WERTHEIM

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MICHAEL BYERS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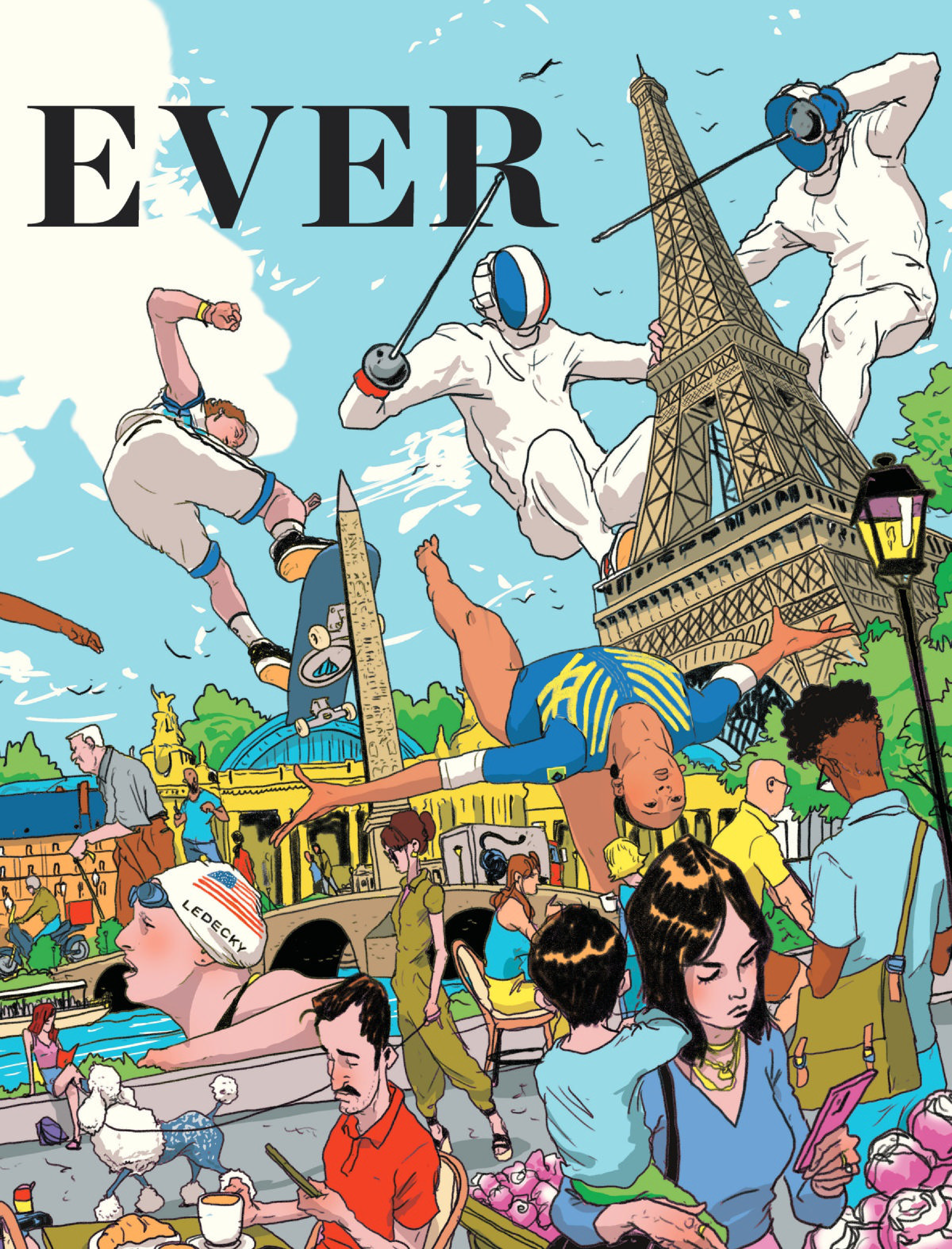


For the past few Olympic cycles, some of the most suspenseful races have come *before* the opening ceremony. The event has no formal designation, but it distills to something like this: *Can the host city get its act together and scramble to finish off its ambitious preparations before facing international embarrassment?*

On the eve of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, local officials were still rounding up stray dogs while doors were being affixed to hotel rooms and plumbers were installing toilet seats in the athletes' village. In the hours before the Rio Games began in '16, workers were fixing gas leaks and repairing the recently collapsed main ramp of the sailing venue.

The 2024 Games in Paris, which commence a year from now, are unlikely to feature many of these dramatic madcap dashes against the clock. Overwhelmingly, the venues and facilities that will be used from July 26 through Aug. 11, 2024, are already in existence. There are no subway lines or street lanes or luxury hotels in need of hasty construction. Most of the city's peerless infrastructure was already intact the last time Paris held the Olympics. Which was in 1924, an even century ago.

If there's any apprehension in the run-up, it will come from a different source: Will the locals care? Will the folks in the brasseries and boulangeries lose their Gallic, cool remove and infuse the Games with energy and whimsy and passion?

Right now you could spend a week in Paris and then head home oblivious to the fact that the Olympics are coming to town. You're more likely to hear chatter about the iron and lead used in the restoration of Notre Dame than about the bronze, silver and gold to be distributed one summer hence.

Take in the bottomless charms of Paris, as this reporter recently did, and you'll see posters for art exhibits and photo shows and operas and Bruce Springsteen tour dates and notices for Shannen Doherty headlining some kind of manga/sci-fi convention. But nothing pertaining to a quadrennial global sporting event. If locals mention Paris 2024 at all, it's often in the context of how much their apartments will fetch on Airbnb while they're in Provence or Mallorca or Greece.

One of the few Paris 2024 earmarks: a modestly sized replica of the Olympic rings adorns the Hôtel de Ville, the city hall. And a few blocks away, the Forum des Halles mall is the site of an "Official Olympic Boutique" pop-up shop. There, one could buy a plush toy in the image of the Games' mascot, Olympic Phryge, a fiendishly doe-eyed anthropomorphic red hat, for roughly $45. Could. But not many do. The store is run by one worker who spends considerable time on his phone, wearing the national look of boredom, as Whitney Houston plays on the loudspeakers.

Yet for all of this—to pick a few French words, nonchalance? Insouciance? Ennui?—one could argue that there is not only nothing to fear, but also that this is, ultimately, for the best. And it all augurs for Olympic success of a different kind.

IT HAS BEEN a bit of a rough patch for the Olympic movement. China held the most recent Winter Games, an awkward affair and a strikingly regrettable—or strikingly fitting—choice to host a global event in a world already slinking toward authoritarianism. Even Thomas Bach, the International Olympic Committee's usually cheerleading and generally invertebrate president, conceded as much: "The Olympics cannot solve problems that generations of politicians have not solved."

Before China's problematic hosting, the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics were held in '21, delayed a year by COVID-19. Before that? The '18 Winter Games in PyeongChang, South Korea, were a buzz-deprived ratings bust, at least in the U.S. and Europe. When Brazil was awarded the '16 Olympics, the country appeared to be an emerging global superpower. When the Games arrived, the country was mired in a recession. When the Games ended, Brazil began paying off its cost overruns, an exercise that continues to this day. Which brings us back to '14, in Sochi, where Vladimir Putin spent wildly on his exercise in Russian triumphalism (including the budget for his systematic doping campaign). During the Games, the emboldened Russian president annexed Crimea, foreshadowing the Ukraine invasion he would launch eight winters later, the day after the Beijing Games ended.

And now for the palate cleanse.

With abundant supporting evidence, the IOC stands accused of aiding and abetting acts of sportswashing, the voguish term whereby a country uses competition and gleaming stadiums to launder its image and distract from human rights abuses.

Yet the 2024 Olympics represent a kind of sportswashing in *reverse*. By bringing its road show to a country *without* human rights offenses, political repression, stifled dissent, autocratic rule or a closed internet, it is the IOC itself—not the host—that might find some reputational redress by association. This isn't a sullied country using the Olympics to improve its image. This is a sullied Olympics using a country to decontaminate itself.

PARIS 2024 IS A KIND OF SPORTSWASHING IN REVERSE. **IT IS THE IOC**—NOT THE HOST—THAT MIGHT FIND SOME REPUTATIONAL REDRESS.

Instead of cozying up to strongmen, instead of watching an emerging country mortgage its precarious financial future on wretched sporting excess, the Games head to . . . [*cue accordions*] Paris, a place that hardly needs a sporting event to shore up its image or goose its tourism.

Sports predictions often come cheap. But bank on this for Paris 2024: There will be no stories of vacant white-elephant stadiums or state-run doping scandals or disastrous cost overruns. The IOC bringing the Olympics to Paris is akin to your cousin investing in T-bills, having learned his lesson after a crypto bender.

On the subject of finance, Paris will spend between $4 billion and $5 billion in the staging of the Games, which sounds like a lot. But it's about a third of the final bills for Rio 2016 and Tokyo '20 and is downright stingy stacked up against, say, the $50 billion Russia committed to the Winter Games a decade ago, never mind the $220 billion Qatar invested in infrastructure and construction hosting the men's World Cup last December. Plus, more than 95% of the Paris '24 expected costs will be covered by the IOC, sponsorships and games revenue. Premium partnerships have been fetching in the neighborhood of €100 million (roughly $110 million).

Paris 2024 isn't just doing this on the cheap. Its austerity was part of the pitch, both to the IOC and to the French citizenry. Officials have gone so far as to brag that reducing the number of torches used in the torch relays will be a cost savings (and environmental benefit). Again and again, President Emmanuel Macron has stated flatly, "There will be no Olympic tax."

Nor should there be. The construction costs for new facilities are minimal. And existing facilities will be used creatively and economically. The only permanent structures being built: the Le Bourget Sport Climbing Venue and the aquatics center, which, after the Games, will benefit Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. A number of facilities are temporary and will be disassembled after the Games. In service of efficiency and economy, other venues will hold multiple events. For instance, Roland Garros, home of the annual French Open, will host tennis, yes, but also boxing.

"Everything is on budget," says Etienne Thobois, CEO of the Paris Organising Committee and a French badminton player at the 1996 Atlanta Games. "The resources on the revenue front is going well. The ticketing program is so far a great success. The sponsorship, on its way; almost 90% of our revenue target is already achieved. So all in all, we are pretty in a good place, right where we want to be coming into the home stretch."

As host, Paris will, inevitably, be analogized to London, home to the 2012 Summer Games, which were, incontrovertibly, an overall success. Two cities, bracketed together in the best of times. Barely two hours apart by train. Both having hosted the Games twice before.

But the comparisons between 2012 and '24 go only so far. In the case of London, organizers took an entire part of town, the docklands known as Canary Wharf, and turned it into an Olympic Village, studding it with new venues and housing for thousands of athletes, helping load up the Games' tab to a dramatically over-budget $15 billion. Not so Paris. Inasmuch as there will be a vital center, it will be in Saint-Denis, a suburb nine miles north of the Eiffel Tower, where the Olympic Village will be within walking distance of the Stade de France, the venue for track and field events as well as rugby.

But the pulsing heartbeat for Paris 2024 will not be confined to a village, but rather (and quite intentionally) diffused throughout the city, if not throughout the erstwhile French empire as a whole. (Sailing will be held on the Mediterranean in Marseille; surfing in Tahiti, French Polynesia.)

The 2024 Games will make clever use of Paris's public spaces and landmarks. Jerry-built behind the Eiffel Tower, a temporary stadium will host beach volleyball. A few hundred yards behind that, a temporary Grand Palais will host judo. A short walk away, archery will be held in front of the Hôtel des Invalides, home to French military museums and the tomb of Napoleon. A brisk mile walk from there, La Concorde, the square in the heart of the city, will host "urban sports" like BMX freestyle, breaking, skateboarding and 3 × 3 basketball events.

From hotels and apartments in the center of Paris, fans and spectators will be able to walk (or bike) to most of the venues. Paris's subway and mass transit system, the Metro, is as good as any in the world. Cars will be largely obsolete. Local organizers already brag that these Games will enlist 40% fewer vehicles than London's. The organizing committee scarcely issues a press release without using the word *sustainability*.

"EVERYTHING IS **ON BUDGET**," SAYS THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE CEO. "THE REVENUE FRONT IS GOING WELL. THE TICKETING PROGRAM IS SO FAR A GREAT SUCCESS."

THE REAL STAR attraction of the Games, however, will be the great Parisian secret hidden in plain sight. The Seine wends its way through town, cleaving Paris before heading northwest and eventually emptying into the English Channel. From a distance, the river is greatly romantic. Up close, not so much: a repository for discarded wine bottles, Orangina cans, bicycles, sewage and so many pollutants it is unfit for most fish, let alone humans.

Beyond sustainability, organizers are promising improvement: As part of their bid to the IOC, the Paris Olympic Committee and Paris's long-serving mayor, Anne Hidalgo, vowed that the Seine would be decontaminated to the point

it would be fit to host events. And as part of the effort to gin up local support for the bid, organizers promised that the Seine would stay sufficiently clean that Parisians could swim in the river (legally) for the first time in a century.

When France hosted the 1900 Olympics, seven swimming events were held in the Seine. But by the 1924 Games, the river had already been deemed too polluted for human use. A swimmable Seine has long been a promise unfulfilled by too many political candidates to list. But soon after the IOC picked Paris, the city sunk more than $1 billion into a complex project to clean up the river. (The city may even be trendsetting. *Time* reported recently that Los Angeles, host of the 2028 Games, has sent water and sanitation officials to Paris to see what lessons can be learned for the L.A. River.)

The plan is less about purifying the river than treating waste and creating elaborate pipes, pumps, tanks and channels to reroute discharge and bacteria. Locals are skeptical that "the swimming plan" will come to fruition and that, by 2025, there will be public pools implanted in the river. But as promised, the Seine will figure prominently in the Games. Instead of holding the opening ceremony in a stadium, Paris '24 will commence with a pageant on the river, with more than 100 barges and boats filled with athletes, drifting for six kilometers past an anticipated 600,000 onlookers assembled on the banks and on bridges.

Then, open-water swimming and the triathlon will not only be held on the Seine, but also will be open to the public.

"One thing we're quite proud of is that we were able to maintain a complete support with the Games at every kind of level. The general public has been consistent from the start, which was not always the case in prior Games," says Thobois. "Maybe the biggest surprise is that we [haven't yet had] such a big surprise."

Next summer there will be snags. There always are. Organizers have already increased the budget by €400 million, half of which has been attributed to energy price spikes caused by the war in Ukraine. Top committee leadership has churned, as officials sniped at each other. And a June police raid on the Paris 2024 headquarters as part of an investigation into corruption in the awarding of public contracts raised deep concerns. But largely, the Games are on track. Organizers tout that more than 6.8 million tickets have already been sold, roughly two-thirds of the overall inventory, even if a healthy chunk of the buyers have been British and American.

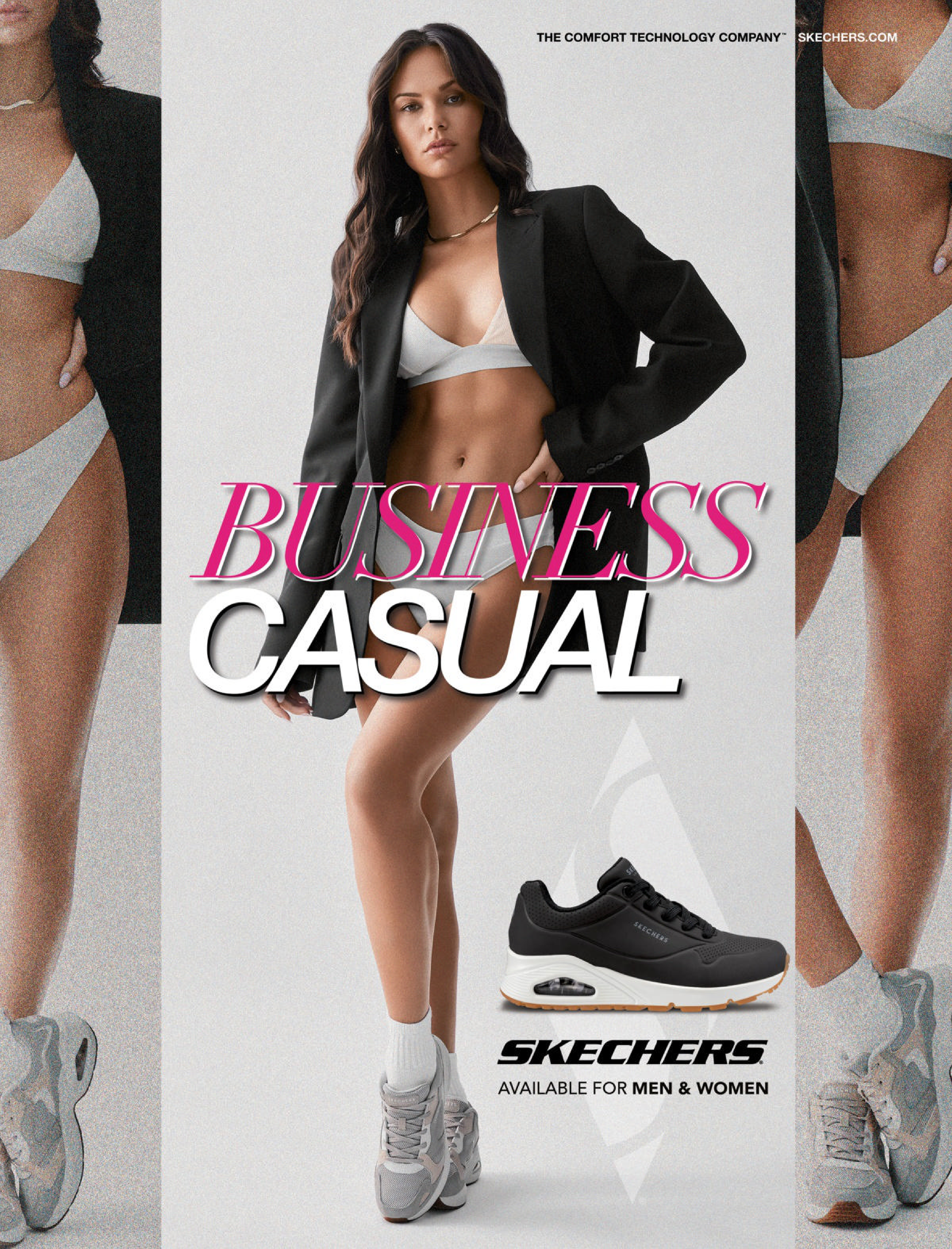
There is an inescapable sense that, after years of turmoil and scandal, the Games are in mature, steady, responsible hands. And that local excitement for these artisanal Olympics will arrive eventually. In keeping with the national character, it will just show up fashionably late. ☐

POINT AFTER

LACONIC AND ICONIC

As triumphant MVP proclamations go, “I’m going to Disney World!” it wasn’t. Minutes after he led the Nuggets to their first title with a five-game dismantling of the Heat, the humblest NBA star’s thoughts were 5,600 miles away. “I need to go home,” Nikola Jokić said. And within days, the lowest draft pick (41st in 2014) to win a Finals MVP was back in Sombor, Serbia, walking his dogs and watching his family’s harness horses run. His father, Branislav, told reporters at the track that his son would not be talking that day. “He told me, ‘Dad, I have had enough of publicity during these past few days,’ ” Branislav said. “And I believe him.”

SRDJAN STEVANOVIC/GETTY IMAGES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